

## Revenge is Sweet

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## Revenge is Sweet

by [orphan\\_account](#)

### Summary

A teenage Snape plots his revenge on James Potter for making his life hell, but little does he know that James has plans of his own that will send both their lives spiraling irrevocably out of control.

### Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

## Chapter 1

Severus emerged slowly from the pit of the dungeons. Head bowed, he elbowed his way through the sleepy crowd with little consideration.

The tempting smell of well prepared food had wafted through his senses only briefly, before Severus was forced to retreat. His eyes narrowed sharply as the oak front doors to the castle flung open.

Four careless figures jostled their way inside, eyeing the promise of a late dinner with interest.

Severus' face darkened into a sneer as he automatically shrunk back into the shadows. Wedged awkwardly between a suit of armour and a large, faceless statue, his rigid figure was barely distinguishable against the harsh curves of the stone wall behind him.

An broad iron shoulder partially obscured Severus' vision as he peered at the group, his chest constricting with a familiar pain. He clenched his wand in his palm.

To Severus' surprise, Sirius, Remus and Peter bid a temporary farewell the fourth and leading member of the group, leaving the messy haired Gryffindor to swagger onwards alone.

The armour creaked loudly as Severus's grip on its metallic arm intensified.

James made a beeline directly towards his hiding place. Unaware of his favourite victim's presence, as of yet, he begun to whistle a tune, hands thrust deep into his pockets. Robe-less, he'd left his shirt hanging out untidily from his close-fitting trousers, with his house tie hung loose about his neck.

Severus scowl deepened at the content expression that adorned the handsome lines of James' face. It was physically sickening to comprehend the degree to which James could appear so purely, mindlessly happy, while simultaneously making his life so unbearable.

To his sheer gratification, James did not once glance in his direction.

Just as Severus deemed it safe to dart out from his hiding place and sweep back down towards the dungeons, a female voice called out.

James grinned slowly, doubling back a dozen steps to just a few feet from where Severus stood, rooted to the spot. He offered a lazy smile to the small, pretty sixth year Hufflepuff hurrying towards him.

Trapped, Severus watched the scene unfold before him, both horrified and in awe.

James pushed the girl up against the portrait, directly opposite from where he stood, and was, as far as Severus could make out from the tangle of limbs and occassional slurping, kissing her senseless.

He snorted quietly and gave a small, bitter shake of his head. Being a year older, the girl would have turned her nose up at anyone in a lower year. But no, this was James bloody Potter. How could she possibly resist? It did not matter that he was two years younger and half a head shorter. It was every students' fantasy to get into his pants at least once. And he made no challenge of it.

Severus longed to disappear as they continued their public display of indecency. He swallowed the sudden sickness that had arisen in his throat.

Everyone in the school was used to the quidditch stars' confidence with the opposite sex, and complete shamelessness. He'd a different girl on his arm every week.

But there was always something about the intimacy in which James devoted to his girls that enthralled Severus, having never witnessed such affection at a time before Hogwarts.

The occupants of the frame the couple were pressed against cried out in outrage, while Severus groaned both from irritation and humiliation. He did not need the hand that patted irritably against the front of his jeans to recognise that he'd very quickly grown aroused.

This entirely separate form of discomfort was also nothing new to Severus. It was a problem that had burdened him for the entire year, and also something he'd yet to find a cure for.

He shifted slightly and swore under his breath, desperately willing away the tightening in his pants. He snapped his intense gaze away from the lovers, eyes roaming to the floor, to the ceiling and back to the floor.

But his treacherous mind created the images that he denied his eyes, and his problem remained.

Who was he to get off on watching Potter devour some girl? Porn magazines, explicit muggle movies, masturbating under the covers while the other boys in his dorm got changed... Nothing could get him as desperate for release, while equally as riled up, than watching James Potter turn on his sleazy seduction act.

Severus knew it was wrong, on so many levels, but as much as he hated himself for it, he was useless to fight against his body's irrational response to the school's most popular student. It seemed he was no more immune to James Potters' striking appeal than the entire female population. Severus would convince himself otherwise, refusing to categorize himself with a load of giggling, hormonal airheads that, in his opinion, made up the majority of the opposite sex.

It was that devilish smirk, that ridiculous unkempt hair, that quidditch toned body with perfect complexion. It was the fact the boy was clever. Oh so clever. He was hilarious, witty, popular, charming, happy. He was powerful, and Severus was nothing if not drawn to such talent. He was everything the lonely Slytherin had ever wanted to be, everything he desired, yet opposed the idea of finding appealing in equal measures.

James was also a complete arsehole and Severus hated him dearly.

Severus fought the urge to stroke himself through the material of his trousers, as the need for friction intensified along with his own mortification. He could hardly ignore what his body wanted when it responded so enthusiastically to James' very presence. It just made Severus loathe himself, adding to the illusion that had been concocting itself for the entire of his life; he was a weirdo, a loser and a freak.

Eyes glued to the pair, Severus struggled, frustrated and agitated.

Bracing one arm against the hip of the statue standing proudly before him, he tugged down his trousers until they slipped down his thin waist to a crumpled heap on the floor.

Glancing down at the distortion of his flimsy boxers with a hateful expression, Severus fumbled aside the material to grip himself with a shaking hand. Eyes wide, mouth contorted into a pained grimace as his legs begun to tremble with each wave of reluctant pleasure.

He jerked his wrist erratically.

"I have to go," the girl murmured, breath catching.

Severus watched James' dark head, moving languidly along her slender neck with practiced patience.

"James, I'm being serious," she laughed. "It's late. My friends will wonder where I am..."

Severus closed his eyes and muffled his whimpers against a clenched fist, trying to ignore the irritating female voice. Her role in his arousal played only a minor part.

"Mmm-Hmm..." James replied absently.

Despite his loud inner protesting, explicit images of himself and James, in the exact same position that the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were in now, flooded Severus' mind and he was lost further.

The reality of his thoughts was enough to wilter his erection into nothingness, but as with whenever he was unfortunate enough to find himself in such a compromising position, he shut off that more rational side of his brain and simply went with the bodies urges.

It wasn't often that he was aroused. It normally took far too long to work himself up to a decent orgasm, as his long-fingered hands, as skillful as they were with a potions rod, proved too little stimulation on their own in this particular forte. But if this is what it took to get himself a little satisfaction, he'd accept it. For now. Severus was, after all, as hormonal as any other teenager.

"James..."

Severus opened an eye to watch her half-heartedly remove her arms from around James' neck and push at his chest.

"Stop. We can't do this here." She cast her eyes around the immediate area surrounding them and giggled, hiding her face in James' shoulder as a passing group of third years stopped to stare curiously at them.

James followed her gaze and smirked arrogantly, before giving his flushed faced partner a quick, teasing kiss and stepping back.

"I suppose you're right," he drawled, before sighing dramatically in regret. With a side-ways glance at their audience, he leaned back in closely for a moment, brushing aside a strand of the girl's hair so that he could whisper in her ear.

Severus had to strain to hear what he said, but immediately wished he hadn't. James' promise to follow up on their encounter that night in the privacy of the prefects bathroom was not something he, or his body, needed to hear.

James bowed his partner gracefully on her way, throwing a wink in the direction of her potential competitors.

"Later Jenkins.".

"It's Jenkins," the girl corrected him, a brief expression of hurt crossing her features as she smoothed out her robe.

"Right," James agreed absently, unabashed, "Of course it is."

Severus snorted loudly, he couldn't help it.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath, pulling his hand sharply from inside his pants and cursing again, more loudly, as he snagged himself on his zip. He closed his eyes tightly and flattened himself against the wall as he braced himself for the inevitable.

Severus breathed deeply. His heart was pounding so hard in his chest that he was sure they could hear it.

God forbid if James found him like this... He should have left when he had the chance.

Turning rapidly, he came into contact with a chest much more defined than his own, causing him to stumble slightly and clutch at the statue for support.

Two hands grabbed him roughly by the collar, pulling him backwards and throwing him hard against the opposite wall. Severus winced as James appeared directly before him, hazel eyes glinting maliciously.

Ironically, they'd ended in exactly the same place James and the girl had been moments before. This did nothing to ease Severus's little problem. He refused to admit disappointment as James' frown, instead of turning passionate, morphed into a snarl. It was an expression far from that of wanting to initiate a kiss.

"Snivelly?" James spat, his voice full of anger and distaste. "How long have you been standing there? Have a nice little show did you, you sick bastard?"

"I wasn't... I didn't..." Severus stammered. His face burned scarlet as he inwardly cursed himself for his own stupidity.

James raised a dark eyebrow, an evil look on his face. All of his earlier sense of playfulness was lost.

"No?" he questioned suspiciously.

His vice-like grip on Severus' wrists was hard enough to leave bruises as he pushed himself closer, so that their bodies were pressed together.

Severus' eyes widened as he felt, just as James' did, the evidence of his inappropriate staring trapped between them.

"You..." James looked almost disbelieving, as he raked his eyes unappreciatively over the harsh lines of Severus' face.

Severus' wrists were brought sharply over his head and he winced in pain. What could he possibly say to explain himself? Except that he had no more desire to bear this burden than James had to witness it.

"Those looks you give me... That... intense look, all the time. In class, in the corridors... whenever I see you... There's more than just hate. I knew it. You fucking fancy me."

Severus' chest grew unbearably tight and he swayed on his feet, fighting against his own impeding horror. He'd never thought that death would scare him. He'd almost welcomed it on many occasions but this, right now, felt more like dying than anything had previously and it had never been less welcome.

He tugged at his constraints with sharp, panicky jerks, attempting to push past his captor, but James held him still.

"You really are messed up, aren't you?" An edge of curiosity disrupted James's frown, and he pushed himself more closely into Severus' personal space.

With a moments hesitation, he started grinding his hips against those presented to him.

Severus' eyes widened as they met the clear challenge in James' hazel ones, and his breath hitched.

James' own sweet breath was all over his face, and he couldn't think straight. He couldn't find the strength to continue his attempt to push him away, no matter how much he desperately needed to, in order to save what little dignity he had left.

A strangled whimper clawed its way up Severus' throat. Both knew that there was more than a mere expression of pain in that small, throaty sound. To his further mortification, Severus found that, even though this was hell itself, twisted with his most intimate sexual fantasies, he was relieved. James knew how he felt, for better or for worse. He would no longer need to hide his infatuation.

Severus moaned loudly, involuntarily, as the assault continued, the intense sensations in his groin causing him to arch up in unmistakable excitement.

Humiliation could not get more unbearable than this, which Severus knew was exactly the point of James' actions.

Severus clenched his mouth closed, suppressing a moan, his face, if possible, flushing more deeply as his body could not help but react to such foreign stimulation. This was beyond torture. This was beyond any humiliation he'd ever suffered. Ever. And even now, in his own sick habit of self-torturing, he could not wish completely that James would stop.

Drawing up the last scraps of his courage, he lifted his face to meet the hazel eyes just inches from his own, raw emotion strewn freely across his face.

Slightly darker than their usual soft brown, James' eyes were piercing into his, his face flushed.

As Severus began to thrust back against the pressure, his body acting of its own accord, James dropped his wrists and roughly shoved him away. The extreme look of revulsion on his face made Severus cringe.

"Listen, you greasy haired creep," James breathed finally, hatred etched into every line of his thin face. "If I ever catch you perving on me ever again, I'll personally see to it that every person in Hogwarts knows about your little twisted habits."

Severus nodded weakly, mortified beyond belief.

James held him firmly for a moment longer, Severus' robes twisted in his fist. There was no interest, or even much curiosity, in the way that he stared at the slightly smaller boy, just contempt and such an intense disgust that Severus arousal was dying as quickly as it had begun.

"Go on then, clear off," James snapped impatiently.

Severus didn't need telling twice. He ran and he ran until his legs could no longer stand it. Collapsing in the nearest bathroom, he fought hard to get his breath back. He clamped his hands over the sink and gasped for air. He was going to be sick.

Severus slowly looked up at his pale, uncomplimentary sculptured face reflected in the cracked mirror as his nausea passed in a haze of deep regret, and cursed the day he'd ever met James Potter.

Why couldn't his body let him hate him in peace? Why did it torture him so? Hadn't he been through enough?

He slammed his hands down, making the whole sink shake, a fresh crack added to marble tiles holding the fragile framing together.

It wasn't like he'd ever have Potter as his own to release him from this irrational sexual frustration. Not that he'd ever seriously contemplated the thought.. That was dangerous ground indeed. The idea of willingly touching James intimately repulsed him, yet at the same time the mere thought... the memory of the breath on his face, the firm hands where they burned holes in his skin through his clothes and made his head spin... It twisted his stomach into knots and made his heart pound in a way that was not all unpleasant.

Severus sighed deeply and wearily, almost undone by it all. How could he ever compete against this? He couldn't get more opposite to the gorgeous Gryffindor...

Severus hissed sharply against his own thoughts, a self-disgust so strong radiating through him that he spun himself from the mirror and begun pacing, unable to stand the sight of his own sallow face.

He clamped his hands over his face, trying in vain to dispel his foul thoughts. What kind of person was he to get some sick, perverted pleasure out of someone who caused him such intense pain and misery? He had to do something. Anything. He wanted... No, he needed revenge. Revenge on James Potter for making his life complete and utter, undeniable hell.

His malicious Slytherin mind had come up with many plans, over the years, of how to get back at James. Each idea had been magnificently revolutionary, yet equally as impossible as the next. But now it had to be different. Severus couldn't take this any longer. There had to be a solution.

Severus swept from one end of the bathroom to the other, cursing wildly and erratically. He didn't know how long he confined himself to that small space and deliberated, but by the time darkness had fallen upon the castle, blackening the enchanted windows and obscuring the landscape outside, he had the perfect plan formed.

Eyes wide, almost delirious, he didn't care right now that it was the craziest idea he'd had to date. If it worked, it would ruin James Potter to such an extent that Severus would finally claim vengeance.

His lips tilted into an evil smirk. Yes, if this worked it would be the end of Potter's reign as king of Hogwarts; no friends, no admirers and no hope of finally ever winning round Lily Evans. He would at last know exactly how it felt to be him.

What was it Potter had said? 'The whole school would know of his twisted fantasies...'

Well, what could be worse than being caught willingly snogging the most slimy, detestable boy in school? It couldn't be impossible to win his affections... James would kiss him and the whole school would see, and subsequently he would lose everything.

But first Severus must make him love him, for love was the only thing that would make James Potter be seen with him anywhere even partially public.

Severus pulled at his tangled greasy hair. Maybe not now, but he would become an eligible bachelor. He would make it work and, if he were exceptionally lucky, relieve some of his sexual frustration at the same time. What did he have left to lose?

Public humiliation. It was the one thing that would hurt James Potter most. Severus would seduce James, heart and body, if it was the last thing he did.

## Chapter 2

Friday night poker for the marauders wasn't just a habit, it was a necessity. They played religiously, without fail, every week like clockwork, despite all else that may be transgressing in their lives; this was the one certainty they could count on in a place as unpredictable as Hogwarts.

The only interruption they received to their tradition was the full moon, and as this brought excitement and an opportunity for mischief all of its own, it was not unwelcome.

The four friends were sat round their favourite shabby table, a number of random objects strewn in a haphazard mess over the aged wood, long after everyone else had turned into bed. The dim light from the fire cast shadows across the cards in their hands, though the muggle game itself played only a minor role in their evening. Greater significance was given to the heavy consumption of firewhiskey and the administration of dodgy spells.

The shrieking shack was creepy at this time of night, or would have been without their presence. Desolate and haunted in its exterior, it gave security and confidence to their actions, creating the perfect site for all that they intended to go unnoticed.

James' invisibility cloak was cast to the side, a loyal accomplice to their treachery, awaiting its next use which would not be until the early hours of the following morning when they'd creep back into their own beds invisibly, and therefore unchallenged and unpunished for their nights crimes.

Remus, never being one to hold much alcohol, lay slumped over the table, his eyes bloodshot and weighed down with huge, unattractive bags. He mumbled incoherently as he flicked through his hand of cards, contemplating his next move as though it were a decision that held his very life in the balance.

Peter followed the careful handling of treasured gambling items avidly, after having lost his own place at the table many hours ago, when he failed to keep up with the speed and ruthlessness of the game that fell short of his limited understanding.

It did not take long for his attention to dwindle and he encouraged conversation into something more to his preference.

"It's your turn to make a dare, Sirius," he said abruptly as James pulled forwards Remus' favourite quill and Sirius' latest stash of Hogsmeade's best sweet selection, the current round won.

He glanced up as Peter spoke and gave a small smile, knowing instantly what he was referring to.

Peter never failed to remind them of his own personal favourite part of a Friday evening. Watching them take part in some of the most outrageous, daring stunts would have him wetting his pants for a month.

Looking up at the handsome young wizard he whined, "Go on... Remus made one last week..."

"Fine," Sirius answered shortly, casually taking a long draw from his cigarette, which held a lot more than cheap tobacco. "Go run around outside stark naked with your pants on your head, Wormtail, and see how many people you can wake up."

Remus and James sniggered while Peter flushed and scowled at Sirius.

"Ok, ok..." Sirius grinned, a mischievous glint in his eye as he thought about it more seriously.

"James..." he said finally, turning to his friend and taking the cards he offered, "I dare you to kiss the ugliest girl in school."

"What?" James laughed, making a face. "Whatever, Padfoot. You can do better than that."

"No, I think he's got a good idea," Remus slurred, brightening up, "It's safe. No trouble. We can do it tomorrow when we're all more..." He hiccuped loudly and winced, "sober..."

The others shared a smirk as Remus clutched at his stomach, a grimace on his face.

"You're the only one here who can't hold his alcohol, Mooney," James informed him, amused.

"Peter can't either-" Remus begun, clearly protesting but Sirius cut across him.

"Ah, but Wormtail doesn't drink. He knows his limits, unlike you who refuses to admit that you're a lightweight."

Remus attempted to scowl, but it came out more of a pained expression and he quickly gave up. "I thought we were doing dares. Leave my mental state out of this," he grumbled, one arm still protectively held round his unsettled stomach.

"Hm..." James laid his cards to the side and yawned widely with a glance at his watch. "It's still early... What do you say Sirius? Up for doing something?"

"If you are," Sirius answered lightly, "but I already made my dare."

James rolled his eyes but the dare was insisted upon.

"Mooney had a point about our record. I hate to say it, but I don't think we can afford to pull anything too major until things have calmed down a bit again. I say we pass this week with a less destructive dare."

"Go on, this could be funny," Remus encouraged, pulling himself into a proper sitting position, and hesitating for a moment while he waited for his vision to become clearer. "Let's do Sirius' dare, James. We all know how much you love kissing."

"There's a big difference between kissing a proper chick and kissing a..."

"Hen?" Remus prompted, giving James a serious nod. "I see what you mean. I once kissed a sheep and that was not a pleasant experience at all..."

Peter laughed loudly but the other two merely shook their heads with a sigh.

Sirius lunged forwards as Remus pulled yet another bottle into his lap. "When are you going to learn, Moony? Just stick to water. This is cute and everything, but you'll regret it in the morning. You always do. I swear you're a different person when you-"

"Shut up," Remus moaned, massaging his temples and removing the liquor from Sirius' reach. "I'm trying not to think about it."

Sirius rolled his eyes in exasperation, turning back to James. "So..."

"I'm not doing it," James retorted, shaking his head. "I have a reputation you know."

"Come on, James... No one has to see, just us. And the sheep of course," Remus persisted, "but hang on... How about we change it to the ugliest guy in school? Yeah, Sirius? Far more exciting."

Looks of pure disgust fell onto the faces of the other three at these words. Remus was legend when he was drunk, he really was, but sometimes he went too far. The pleasant, charming, cultured young man disappeared under the first bottle of the fiery liquid, to be substituted by his wicked double - admittedly the more fun, yet dangerous of the two.

"No way am I kissing Severus Snape!" James cried immediately, nose wrinkling at the very thought. He snatched the bottle from Remus and threw it into the bin in the corner of the room, ignoring his protests.

"Yeah, Mooney that's going a bit far," Sirius agreed, not arguing the first person that came to James' mind was by far the ugliest guy he'd ever seen. "No one in their right mind would touch that grease ball."

"Not even one simple kiss?" Remus looked between the two, taunting them. "Really that bad, James? You never know you may like it..." he teased.

James scoffed.

"Or we could change it to animals?" Remus suggested brightly and gaped at his friends, confused as they fell silent.

"I worry about you sometimes, Mooney. Is there something you want to tell us? Hmm?" Sirius nudged him with his foot and Remus swayed dangerously, "What have you been getting up to without us on full moon?"

"I think you could do it!" Peter exclaimed, turning to James and away from the more disturbing conversation of the other two, desperate to be involved. "Kiss Snape. You really could."

"Come to think of it..." Sirius said, leaning back on his elbows and looking totally relaxed and effortlessly handsome as he eyed James, "this could be fun... But let's say we up the stakes a little. Make it a real dare. Kissing, on its own, is boring."

James rose his eyebrows at his friend, curious to what crazy idea he'd come up with this time.

Sirius thought for a moment then said slyly, "why don't you get Snape to... fall in love with you?"

James looked at his wide eyed eager expression and couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Merlin, Padfoot. Where did that come from?"

He looked at Remus for support, but he too was looking interested and he let out another short laugh.

"Like that would ever happen," he said, "come on guys, be serious. Me and Snape, yeah I can really see that happening..."

"You could do it," Sirius said, suddenly serious. "No, in fact I bet you could do it-"

"Sirius..." James sighed. He couldn't possibly be serious. "You're mad."

"No..." Sirius argued. "Think about it, James. Just... think about it..." His eyes grew distant and dreamy look came over his face. "The possibilities... He'd do anything you wanted..."

Sirius continued to stare at him with that same glee in his eye, full of resolve. James shook his head again with more conviction and cast around for a distraction, but Sirius was not to be deterred.

"At least think about it," he begged.

James closed his eyes and tried to think but it was almost impossible to achieve complete concentration when the level of alcohol in his system was beginning to have an effect.

"I can't," he stated bluntly. "I won't do it. No way."

Sirius raised both his eyebrows at him. "Giving up on a dare, James? I thought you'd do anything."

"I...This is not...I don't...Sirius, it would involve me spending a lot of time with the git," James said finally, keeping his voice stern in an attempt to make his friends see reason, "something I really don't want to be doing thanks. Plus," he held up a finger as Sirius started to interrupt, "it would do serious damage to my street cred! I'll be the laughing stock of school hanging about with that miserable little-"

"Not if we play this carefully," Sirius interrupted him, sitting up, eyes holding that mad glint it sometimes did when he was taken with a reckless idea. "You wouldn't have to be seen. Explain to him that you want to keep your relationship secret. No one will have to know...not until..."

"Until when?" James asked warily. "Sirius, I don't know about this-"

"The Ball!" Remus suddenly cried, jumping slightly from his chair, his eyes unfocused. "Do it at the Ball!"

Sirius face alighted in pure glee at that. "Yes, yes, yes!" He got to his feet and beamed down at James in determination. "Yes, James. This will be brilliant!"

James cringed, unconvinced. "Guys-"

"This'll be the biggest, greatest prank ever pulled by the marauders!" Sirius continued passionately, pacing up and down the small room, floorboards creaking as he went.

"Ha! Get him to fall for you, take him to the Ball as your date and humiliate the pants off him! Turn up with a girlfriend or something... Make him declare his undying love for you in front of everyone and then just throw it back in his face. Come on, James. We'll show that snake who's bottom of the pile once and for all! They'll be talking about this one for years."

"Don't you think this is taking things a little too far?" James asked, ruffling his hand through his hair subconsciously, trying to make it all seem more plausible. "I mean, I know he's a scumbag, but falling in love. That's some serious shit."

"Exactly," Sirius smirked, "and only you could pull it off. We'll help you with it. Come on, James..." he insisted. "You'll be famous for this. Every kid in Hogwarts will worship you."

James couldn't deny that this sounded appealing. And Snape's face, he could see it now, completely crestfallen, distraught after having dared to believe that he James Potter, quidditch Captain, popular and top of the class could possibly love him!

That image stuck in his mind: Snape on his knees at his feet, a look of complete desperation and distress on his hideous face... James took a large gulp of firewhiskey and felt his head spin.

All sense of reason that remained was slowly ebbing into complete and utter recklessness.

His mouth tilted into a small, twisted smile.

"Alright," he said slowly, "I'll do it. I'll make him fall in love with me."

Sirius beamed. "And at the Ball...?"

"We'll fuck him up," Peter shouted sickeningly, clapping his hands together. "When's the Ball?"

"One month," James said, looking hard at Sirius. "It ends the school year... That gives me four weeks to get him. But I still don-"

"We should make it final," Remus said standing up to join them. Stumbling slightly, he grasped onto James's sleeve to steady himself. "So that you can't pull out...and if you fail, then-"

"Then I lose," he said simply. "If I can't even make a greasy git like Snape fall in love, then what does that make me? That'll be punishment enough, trust me."

"Nevertheless," said Sirius, clearing the table with his arm and pulling up a chair. "We need to make a pact. We need to be tied to this bet or I know what will happen. You'll cave. And this has to be secret. No one can know. Not until the end or it will never work."

"The Unbreakable Vow..." whispered Remus, "that's what we need, and then you really can't fail!"

"The vow?" Peter looked between them in wonder.

"You're going to have to promise to do this," Remus ignored him, slurring slightly on his words but determined all the same to complete his sentence. "If you don't make him fall in love with you, then it's broken and you die. That's the bet."

Sirius was busy scribbling the terms on a piece of stray parchment. James watched, feeling his adrenaline mount, despite his initial horrors. The mood was infectious.

"But Remus, that's dark magic. You couldn't possibly..." he thought suddenly as the reality of the situation began to dawn on him.

Remus merely waved a hand dismissively. "You'd be surprised what I could do," he said. "Come here. Both of you."

Struck by a sudden impulsiveness and an arrogance that was common nature to him, James held out his hand without hesitation as Sirius signed the parchment.

"Do it," he said firmly, a dull ache at the back of his head that alerted him to the fact that he'd have a very painful hangover tomorrow morning.

Sirius clasped his hand in his, and with Remus as their witness, they made the vow.

Peter, uncontrollably excited by the whole affair, bounced around them like a small child on his birthday. The alcohol in their system soon overtook any desire for further speech and scheming, however, sending them into a hazy slumber as dawn approached.

## Chapter 3

Remus Lupin could barely remember his name when he woke up the next morning. His head pounded sickeningly and his stomach clenched and unclenched, desperate to rid itself of its poisonous contents.

This was a common ritual of a Saturday morning and he was well used to it, but despite its repetitiveness, he never could quite learn to stand the sight of his own sick.

He swallowed thickly and slid down beside the sink, breathing heavily. The fact that James and Sirius were likely to suffer only a small degree of what he would this morning did nothing to ease his mood.

Remus didn't even like alcohol. Firewhiskey burned at his throat and reacted badly to his weak stomach in a way that seemed to escape his friends.

But what it did do, was provide him with a means of escape from the sometimes overbearing burden that had once made his life such a misery. Being a werewolf was not easy.

Remus wiped a shaky hand over his mouth. When he was firmly balanced against the sink once more, he reached forward and pulled open a cabinet. He rummaged through and quickly found what he was looking for.

A small, grateful smile lightened his features for a moment as he examined the potion, his respite, and his saviour. Remus downed it in one large mouthful, thanking his lucky stars that they'd invented this stuff. It simultaneously cleared the head, settled the stomach and freshened your breath- all symptoms of a hangover gone, without a single side-effect. They'd made a fortune with it last year until it had been inevitably banned by Filch. They still had a stash though, much to Remus's gratification, and he was finally able to think in a straight line.

It took a moment, but memories of the previous night quickly began to flood his mind. Remus felt the colour slowly drain from his face as realisation dawned.

Tripping over himself, he ran back into the dormitory to shake awake his friends.

...

Saturday morning found Severus Snape skulking in the dungeons. However, there were a few minute differences in his overall manner that suggested a measure of optimism in the sour face that had not been present on any other day.

His subtle attitude readjustment would have been evident to anyone who'd taken a close look at the lanky, greasy haired Slytherin. But no one did, and so his new found hope would go unnoticed.

Severus replayed his plan over and over in his head, convinced each time that he did in its utter flawlessness. Yet this cunning idea would have to wait until the following week before it took effect, as he was not foolish enough to believe that Potter would appear in the corridors at weekends. There was no quidditch match scheduled that he knew of.

That gave Severus two whole days to formulate his plan to absolute perfection. He wouldn't allow it to fail. He couldn't afford it to.

Seeing as he'd never desired, nor tried, to seduce anyone before, he was not unaware that he needed

some advice. And as there was only one person in Hogwarts who could look at him without flinching, it was towards her that he would venture for guidance.

Lily Evans was in the library, working, when she noticed the familiar form of her Slytherin friend sloping in, attempting, as always, to go unnoticed. She smiled warmly and waved him over.

Severus' mouth twitched in an attempt to return the greeting but he gave up as an awkward moment passed. He could not, try as he might, will his lips into action. He'd always assumed he'd been born with this problem. The odd facial expression that others seemed so willing to indulge and pass back and forth, day to day, was a form of tradition that Severus constantly remained an outsider.

He shifted awkwardly into the chair beside Lily, glad that for once she was alone. He never had the courage to approach her with the usual flock of giggling girls at her elbow.

"Working, Sev?" she raised her eyebrows as he dropped his bag onto the table. "Not like you on a Saturday."

"No, I'm not working," he replied, scanning the room carefully with dark eyes. He wanted no eavesdroppers on this particular conversation. "Not school work. There is...something I wanted to ask you."

"Oh." Lily closed the book she'd been working on and gave him her full attention. It wasn't often that Severus confided in anyone, even her. "What is it? Is everything ok?"

"Yes," he answered after a careful pause, fidgeting slightly, disconcerted by her eagerness to assist. If he hadn't been so adamant in his plan to destroy Potter, he would never have put himself in such an awkward position.

"I was wondering...I just wanted to know...If you ever...If you could tell me..." he stammered, avoiding her eyes.

Severus silently berated himself at his lack of coherence. He'd had this speech prepared; he'd been rehearsing all morning and now he was messing it up. It seemed he'd underestimated just how uncomfortable this was going to be.

Lily sat patiently, waiting with a concerned expression on her face. "It's ok, Sev. Whatever it is... you can tell me."

Snape nodded shortly and took a deep breath. He knew she'd never laugh. He could trust her.

"How could I get someone to like me?" he asked finally, watching her reaction carefully from the corner of his eye.

Lily stared.

"A lot," he added, feeling the heat in his face and scowling against it.

"How could I get someone to like me...a lot," he repeated clearly, encase she hadn't understood. She was his only chance.

"Urm...You want to know how to make friends?" Lily asked uncertainly.

"...Not exactly." Severus had no use for friends and probably never would. "I want someone to love me."

Lily quickly hid her surprise. She certainly wasn't expecting that.

"Do you fancy someone, Severus?" she whispered, unsure as to how she felt about this. She scanned his face carefully, but as ever, he was hiding from her. The reddish tinge to his sallow cheeks was the only clues she got to indicate his true feelings.

Severus stared stonily back at her, silently daring her to laugh.

Lily just raised an eyebrow at his continued silence.

Severus looked away, grimacing to himself and considering his options. If he didn't say anything, he wouldn't have to lie; he didn't want to have to deceive her, though he was a Slytherin, and certainly couldn't tell her the truth. Not in this matter.

Thankfully, Lily was jumping to conclusions all on her own.

"I never thought that you'd...wow, Sev," she breathed, a wide smile forming on her face as she acknowledged his sincerity. "Who is it? Is she in our year? A Slytherin?"

Severus winced, then gave a half committal nod and a small shrug. "Will you help me then?"

Lily very much looked like she was about to hug her smaller friend. Always prepared, Severus glared defensively, disrupting any sort of inappropriate impulse before it could be forced upon him.

It worked. Lily lay her hands firmly on the table, but she continued to smile warmly. "I never thought I'd see the day when Severus Snape would be asking me how to woo a girl..."

Severus blanched immediately and made to stand up, but Lily grabbed his sleeve, hauling him back.

"Sorry, Sev, sorry..." she said quickly, reminded of how easy it was to knock this boy's confidence. Severus never had been able to stand teasing, even if it was totally innocent. "It's just that I'm happy for you," she explained, "and of course I'll help. Sit down. Please."

She packed away the remainder of her books as Severus cautiously reclaimed his seat, apprehensive and wary. It was going to be a long day.

...

"Are you sure, Mooney?"

"Yes!"

"The Unbreakable Vow?"

"Yes!"

Remus stared at the blank, sleepy faces of his friends and willed them, with all his might, to understand.

"Take the potion!" He shoved the bottle into Sirius hands but the dark haired wizard pushed it away with a sluggish grunt.

"You know you're the only one who ever needs that thing, Mooney."

"Then why don't you remember?" Remus hissed in frustration, perplexed that they could not be stimulated enough by his information to at least pay him the slightest bit of attention. Every ounce of his posture screamed out his anxiety, as he turned from face to sleepy face.

"No you don't!" He grabbed Sirius's hand in desperation as the hung-over teen tried to conceal himself once again behind chequered bedspread. "Sirius, James could die!"

Sirius movements stilled, his attention finally gained. His eyes darted over to where James lay snoring peacefully, having fallen back to sleep.

"Alright, Remus," he said slowly. "I'm up, ok? Calm the fuck down."

A short while later, the four fully awake friends sat with rapt attention round the common room fire. They were the only occupants of the room, seeing as it was a Saturday, so they had all the privacy that they needed.

It didn't take Remus long to fill in the missing gaps in the other's memory of the previous night; it was not a rare occurrence as he was frequently required to do so.

"Let me get this straight," James sighed, running his hand through his hair and taking it to ever greater heights of unruliness. "I have to fall in love with Snape or I die."

"No... Snape has to fall in love with you or you die. You made a bet that you could do it," Remus replied, trying hard to be patient. "You and Sirius...and me...We made the vow."

James stared at Remus. It was way too early in the morning to process all of this. He shook his head in denial and looked over to Sirius to see how he was reacting, and found him watching him intently, an unreadable expression on his face.

He knew instantly, as their gazes locked, that he was trying to work out the exact thing he was: how much trouble were they in...?

"I'm so sorry, mate..." Sirius said finally, speaking for the first time since Remus had begun. His voice was still rough from sleep but he did his best to get across his sincerity. "I really am. I would never have... the dare maybe, but not the vow."

"It took two to seal it," James replied quietly, his face ghostly white. He was still unsure of the extent of what they had done, but he did know one thing for sure. He didn't want to die. He liked his life, it was that simple. The threatening of his morality was not something that he could take lightly. He couldn't die now, vow or no vow.

"Three," Remus corrected him. "I cast the spell. We're all in this together."

"But I'm the one who will..." James couldn't finish his sentence but he didn't need to. Remus dropped his eyes and Sirius was staring determinedly at his socks. They both understood the seriousness of what could happen.

A loud snore cut into the silence, distilling the tense atmosphere that had fallen upon them. They all turned towards the interruption and snorted their disapproval. Peter had fallen asleep once again. He looked quite at peace with the world.

James shook his head. "Well, the three of us at least."

"How long does he have?" Sirius asked, looking away from Peter in disgust. "When does he...?" He cleared his throat, like James, not prepared to finish the sentence now that they all knew the

potential outcome of their reckless stupidity.

"One month," Remus answered, attempting to swallow but finding his throat constricted. "If I'm right, he has until the ball. That's when it...ends."

Sirius paled, images of James collapsing, screaming in an agonized death, with the whole school watching, played about his mind. He shivered, and for the first time, he regretted such a immature act on his behalf. He'd always prided himself on his ability to know just when to draw the line.

James sighed, getting annoyed by the nervous glances his guilt ridden friends were sending his way. "Look, I'm not going to die, ok?" he said, frowning firmly at them both. "Remus, come on." He forced a short laugh which he didn't quite manage to pull off, and succeeded only in sounding artificial and uncertain. "You can't have made a vow. It's like really advanced magic. You wouldn't have been-"

"I did," Remus nodded reluctantly, "I'm sure I did. There's no way to check but..."

"So, it's a possibility," James accepted, but quickly grew impatient with the grief that remained solid on his friend's faces. "I understand that, but can you stop planning my funeral already? I've got a chance, haven't I?"

Sirius looked at Remus questioningly, an eyebrow raised as if to say, 'has he?'

"Stop it," James snapped, irritated by their lack of support. "You both thought I could do it last night! What's changed really, except the influence of alcohol? You must have the belief somewhere inside of you that I'd succeed or you'd never have suggested the damn vow."

Sirius sighed and sat back further in his chair, relaxing for the first time. He allowed his eyes to flicker over James before he turned to stare out of the window, admiring the orange glow on the horizon, in a detached sort of way.

He was torn from his stupor by an impatient hand on his shoulder. James spun him round and glared into his eyes. "I don't plan on dying," he said firmly, "so you can stop saying your goodbyes and start helping me figure out how we're going to do this."

"James..."

"No, be quiet, Remus. I need to know how I'm going to get Snape to...you know..." he cringed and took a step back.

Sirius gave him a knowing look but James just frowned. "You thought I could do it last night, Padfoot," he argued, almost pleadingly. "Why not now? Don't make me panic over this, please. I know this is shit and we never should have done it, but what's done is done, right? This can be just another marauder prank...It'll be good... But I need you with me."

"I'm with you James, of course I am," Sirius replied immediately, an irritated edge to his voice now. "And I don't doubt you at all. I just happen to have a problem with you dying, ok?" He pushed James back roughly so that he could see Remus and demanded, "Is he mad or can we do this?"

"We have no choice but to try," Remus answered after a pause in which he studied them both with sad eyes. "I am sorry James. I-"

James hissed and fought the urge to throw a silencing spell and him. "Shut up Mooney, will you? This. Isn't. Your. Fault. Ok?"

He knew it would take more to convince him and there was only one way how. He'd have to do this. He'd make Snape fall in love with him. How hard could it be?

"It'll be good guys, I promise," he said, forcing as much conviction into his voice as possible. "Just like we said it would be last night. It's a dare. They're always dangerous, but that doesn't mean it's impossible."

"James is right," Sirius said, a pure force of need to believe what James was saying distinguishing his doubts. "We made this vow. We'll see it through. We're marauders aren't we? You can make Snape fall in love with you mate, no problem. I don't know what we're worrying about." The lines across his face smoothed with some effort and his mischievous grin took its place, marred only slightly with the remainder of anxiety. "The vow just makes it more exciting."

"Sirius..." Remus warned. This so wasn't a joke.

"What? This could be fun. We may as well make the most of it. This could still be the greatest prank ever pulled. Right, James?"

Remus quickly looked over at the seeker stood leaning against the fireplace with a pensive expression. He couldn't be the only one with who was going to take a sensible view on this. He should have known they'd attempt to make light of such a dire situation.

"The risk does always make it more... interesting," James answered slowly. They both knew that this attitude was the only way to deal with this. They'd have to appreciate it for what it was or suffer the full extent of their conscience. And if James was going to go, he wasn't going to without a fight. Severus Snape was certainly not going to play a part in his death.

"James..." Remus groaned, witnessing the passion for action return to his friend's eyes. "Please, you have to be careful. Take this seriously-"

"I am and I will. This'll be a piece of cake, Mooney you'll see," he smiled confidently at him, "It's not like we have any other choice now." He ruffled his friend's hair as he walked past, back up to the dormitory for some more much needed sleep, followed closely by Sirius.

It was a long while after his friends had disappeared that Remus moved from the confines of the common room. He felt ill with guilt and regret. If James died, he'd never forgive himself. Not ever. He'd wasn't going to drink again. He was, when it came down to it, the only one really changed under alcohol. The others were only slightly less reckless and irresponsible sober. It wouldn't take them long to, once again, become caught up in the danger and excitement of the dare.

But he would have squashed the idea of the vow, without a moment's hesitation, at any other time. They relied on him, whether they knew it or not, to ensure that things never went too far, but now they had and it was all his fault. He'd let them down.

Remus felt the weight of guilt begin to suffocate him and was forced, as James and Sirius had been, to rely on confidence. He'd just have to make sure that whatever happened now, James succeeded and came out of this as unscathed as possible. He did not want to be dealing with his death... He couldn't. Sirius would be unbearable if James died.

...

Lily sighed. It was late in the afternoon already and she could not see that they were making any considerable progress. Severus just seemed completely unenthusiastic and unwilling to co-operate with any of her ideas.

It didn't take her long to realise that while Severus seemed set, determined even, to win the heart of this person, he was clueless as to what it would require of him. He was looking for an easy way round it; a way that would not require him to have to expose himself in any way. He simply failed to accept that this approach was impossible.

"Severus, you're going to have to open up," she said quietly, running a hand through her long hair and sighing deeply, "otherwise I really don't see how I can help you."

Severus continued to scowl, questioning seriously his decision to request Lily's help. He did not like this conversation. It was uncomfortable and made him doubt his plan. He realised only now how difficult this was going to be and he didn't like it at all. The whole thing had seemed so perfect in the bathroom...

"This would be so much easier if you told me who it was you wanted to impress..." Lily said patiently, concealing her irritation, "then we could work out how you could become more appealing to her. Not that I want to change you, Severus. You're wonderful. I just...not everyone sees you the way I do. She certainly won't if you refuse to even speak to her."

Severus cringed. He couldn't help it. Every time Lily used the word 'she' or 'her,' he felt ill. What would Lily say if she knew of his real intentions, and especially whom they were towards?

This wasn't working. He wasn't trying to impress some hormonal teenage girl, so all of Lily's tips, such as 'make her feel important,' 'comment on how nice her hair looks' and 'how beautiful her eyes are,' were completely useless to him. He wanted to get the attention of James Potter!

He knew the guy had an obsession with his hair but telling him how sexy he found the untidy raven locks, or how those deep hazel eyes entranced him, would surely get him nothing short of a punch in the face.

"I'm trying to help," Lily said wearily, as Severus remained tight lipped. "Maybe you should tell me what she's like. You don't have to tell me her name. Just...what kind of person is she? What are her hobbies and interests?"

Severus gave this one some thought. It didn't sound too challenging. He knew what James Potter liked, everyone did. "He...I mean she likes quidditch."

"Quidditch? Cool," Lily repeated, trying to keep her voice from becoming too patronizing. "Ok, that's a start..."

"Except I know nothing of the game," Severus admitted unnecessarily, "so that does not help at all."

"You could learn the rules," Lily suggested hopefully, "pick up a broomstick, try out a few moves...I know the Slytherin team are looking for a new beater."

Severus's horrified expression almost had her giving up on him, but she'd never quit on anyone before and wouldn't start now.

"What is her personality like?"

"Well, she's very arrogant and big headed," Severus begun with a small concentrated frown, "she thinks it's funny to make fun of people and hex them in the corridors, just because she can. She's very popular, though I don't know why, and I hate her friends. She manages to get decent grades, even though she never does any work! And he... she's teacher's pet."

Lily's eyes widened. "Ok..."

"Oh. And she likes the...opposite sex. And kissing. A lot."

Lily opened her mouth but immediately closed it again, unsure of quite what to say with this character assessment. She hid her confusion, wondering as to Severus's choice in girls.

"Sounds a lot like Potter..." she muttered under her breath, strongly reminded of the Quidditch star by Severus's description.

Severus choked. "What?"

"Oh, nothing," she shook her head, not even an ounce of suspicion crossing her mind. "Right then, if she's arrogant, I suggest that you pay particular attention to her appearance. She'll like that. Also, take interest in her other outer-curriculum activities. Attend a quidditch match for example and support her house team-"

Severus shuddered at the thought. Standing out in the pouring rain sporting a Gryffindor scarf and flag, cheering on James Potter, was something he'd not be seen dead doing.

"-she is obviously intelligent, and if you don't feel able to compliment her successfully, you could try contending with her? You could fight for the teachers praise; you'd receive more attention that way and she'd notice you...Is this helping at all, Sev?" she asked doubtfully.

Severus nodded, his tongue between his teeth as he jotted down on a piece of stray parchment the odd points he thought he could use. He refused to let their entire encounter go to waste.

Lily frowned slightly before continuing. She'd never known Severus like this. "Urm...you don't like her friends, so you could try to get her on her own maybe... Isolate her somehow to get some time alone? Then tell her about yourself. Tell her what you like... Don't hide yourself away. Don't be shy, just be...you."

Severus looked uncertain but this time Lily knew exactly what he was thinking. "You do have good points, Severus! You're a great friend and you're a great person."

Severus gave a small snort.

Lily sighed again. "Tell me something you like about yourself, Sev. Go on."

She crossed her arms over her chest. Severus wouldn't have put it past her to wait all day for a response, so he thought carefully about an honest answer.

"I am...reasonably talented at potions," he said, eyeing his delicate, potion stained hands, "and I like the Dark Arts, very much..."

"Well, why don't we leave the dark stuff to the side for now..." Lily suggested, knowing that would impress no girl, not the ones she wanted Severus mixing with anyway. "But the potions we can use..."

...

"Ok..." Lily breathed, a few long hours later. She'd told Severus all she could and could only pray now that it helped him, and that he'd actually take her advice. She'd narrowed her suggestions down to five points in particular, certain that without these he would struggle immensely with his new love interest. They would also help in his everyday life, she was sure.

"Top five tips, Severus?"

"..."

"Come on, you can remember."

Severus thought hard. He ran his hand through his greasy hair and suddenly recalled number one.  
"I must wash my hair."

"Yup," she smiled proudly. "How often?"

Severus hesitated, his eyes narrowing. "A trick question?"

Lily shook her head, fighting a smile. "You must wash your hair whenever it gets dirty. We talked about this, Severus. You're going to wash it every day and get yourself into a cycle."

Severus nodded shortly, less than pleased about the matter.

"What's number two then?"

Lily showed him a set of pearly white teeth and he grimaced, sure that this, more than the others was an impossibility. "Smile..."

"And do you know when?"

Severus glared at her. "When a situation is humorous."

"And when someone smiles at you...?"

"I am to return the facial expression," Severus answered stiffly. "Especially towards...her. Or I am even to initiate the non-verbal greeting myself, without prompt, if there is an appropriate moment."

Lily nodded proudly. "Very good, Severus. And number three?"

"I must walk with my back straight," he answered after a few moments and a quick furtive look at his notes.

"That's right," she grinned, "no more hunching over, just like we practiced. 'P' for posture, Severus. It will make all the difference. Two more to go."

Severus frowned in concentration. He knew the answer...

"Eye..." Lily whispered behind her hand, bashing her lashes madly.

"Eye contact," he grumbled, irritated but refusing to comment on her childish manner.

"And the last one is confidence," he finished promptly.

Lily beamed. "I think you have it, Sev. She won't be able to resist you."

Severus left the library that night, leaving behind a very exhausted but pleased Lily, feeling a lot more confident in his plan. He clutched his carefully made notes to his chest, along with a bottle of shampoo she'd lent him, as he scurried back towards the dungeon.

He thanked Lily Evans a thousand times over, for now he knew he could not fail. He was going to be James Potter's dream come true. Monday couldn't come soon enough.



## Chapter 4

Neither James nor Severus entered the following week without a significant amount of fear.

It was during morning break that James came across Severus for the first time that day, though he made no attempt to approach him in a civilised manner. Doing so in a packed corridor would undoubtedly create much unwanted attention, and a month's worth of gossip.

As a compromise, taking into account the bet, he did not attempt to hex him but decided to ignore his presence altogether.

However, this proved harder than he would have thought. He was far less self-disciplined than he would have liked to think. James' eyes met the Slytherin boy's from across the hall. What happened next had him staggering into Sirius and questioning his eyesight.

Severus paused for a moment, his face paling as the usual fear and hatred. A reddish taint appeared on his sallow cheeks, as he screwed his face up in what appeared to be intense concentration.

He twitched his lips into an expression resembling one which would be commonly viewed in a torture chamber, and then apparently deciding that wasn't enough, revealed his gums around a yellowish set of crooked teeth. His face had crinkled into something that looked remarkably like-

"What the... Merlin, James, did Snape just... bare all of his teeth at you? What is he trying to do now? Fucking scare you to death?"

"I don't think that's it, Sirius," Remus answered seriously from beside them, equally as confused. "I think he was... trying to smile at you, James."

"If that's a smile, I never want to see one again," Sirius pushed them on, making sure to brush roughly past Severus as they did so. "The guys a freak..."

James stared over his shoulder, open-mouthed, but Severus had already disappeared. He'd had his suspicions that Severus already liked him physically, but if the boy were attempting a smile, this could be easier than he thought.

...

"There he is, James!" Sirius hissed, pointing madly. "Over there."

Peter squeaked, hopping from foot to foot, completely caught up in the excitement of it all. "He's right. Can you see him, James? Snape's just down-"

"I see him!" James cried in exasperation, rolling his eyes dramatically in despair.

He shot his over-excited friends a well deserved glare, as people had began to stare and mutter at their odd behaviour. He didn't blame them; they must look ridiculous, crowded round the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons, pointing and shouting like complete fools.

They had found Severus in the most predictable place, and it was time for James to begin his task.

"You have got a plan?" Remus asked, sticking to James's side like glue, his face tense with anxiety. "You know exactly what you're going to do?"

"Of course..." James answered with a confident smile. "Yep... Sure."

Remus narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You have thought this through? Properly?"

"Yeah..." James repeated, then faltered. He hadn't the heart to lie to Remus. The poor boy was wound up enough already. "Well, no. Not exactly..." he admitted, "but how hard can it be-?"

"James..." Remus whined. "You told me this morning you had it all sorted!"

"Calm down, Mooney," Sirius said quickly, nudging him in the ribs and motioning towards Severus. "He'll hear us."

"Yeah," Peter chipped in sulkily, crossing his arms over his chest and watching them with his small watery eyes. "James said-"

"What does it matter what James said if he doesn't even have a bloody plan?" Remus continued loudly, panic starting to set in. He turned on James with an accusing expression. "You had all weekend-"

"I know, I know. But I said I'll handle it and I will!" James turned from them and squinted down the dark corridor, just able to make out the crouching figure, hunched in a shadowy corner at the bottom of the stairwell, and winced.

How on earth was he supposed to go about devising a means in which to seduce the one person who he detested most, when it was the last thing, in the entire world, that he wanted to think about?

"Snape..." he whispered in despair, "Padfoot, you arse. Why Snape? Of all people..."

Sirius patted him on the back with a grin. "'Cos he's the hottest guy in school, why else? You'll just love having his slimy, greasy hands all over-"

"Sirius!" Remus hissed, nauseous. "You're not helping."

Sirius ignored him. "Got your kissing lips on, James?" he teased. "Backcombed your hair properly this morning?"

James pushed him playfully, unsure whether he preferred this new confident Sirius, who was so certain of his success, or the other who'd sink into a depression and give into hopelessness. It seemed as though Sirius had converted completely and would now no longer allow himself to even consider James's failure.

While this had its own advantages, it wasn't half exasperating. Neither of Sirius's contrasting moods were particularly helpful at the moment.

"Shut up, Padfoot," James muttered, straightening up and rotating his shoulders a few times before rolling his neck side to side, feeling it click satisfyingly. What did he have to be worried about? Nothing was impossible, and if he was honest, he knew, when it came to seduction, he was the best man for the job. He wasn't going to get cold feet now.

He was irresistible and Snape was a low life scumbag who'd not been looked at twice in his entire life. He couldn't possibly be refused. Simple as that.

"Right," James said, turning back to his friends, "I'm gonna go talk to him."

"Go for it," Sirius nodded in encouragement, "but remember... If he goes for tongues, make sure you 'scourgify' your mouth at least ten times after-"

"Maybe you guys should just go," James said wearily. "Just let me do this my way."

"We'll meet you back in the common room later then," Remus said, trying and failing to give his friend a smile. "Be careful, James..." he muttered instead with a sad regretful expression, "and good luck."

With final words of encouragement, they disappeared from sight, leaving James with the very daunting task of seducing an exceptionally disagreeable Slytherin.

James felt the minutes drag on and still he hadn't moved. Not an inch. He knew he'd have to soon, but for the moment, he seemed incapable of putting one foot in front of the other.

He just watched the miserable looking boy, sat with his book, all alone and looking more vulnerable and pathetic as the time ticked by.

It took him off guard for a moment, the pure aura of misery and defeat the boy emitted. It was one of the reasons they'd picked him out; he was so helpless and did nothing in himself to prevent it. He just didn't seem to care, or do anything, to make himself agreeable to anybody.

James cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes. A feeling akin to pity began to pool in his gut, mingled with his relentless dislike, as he examined the boy properly, without Sirius at his shoulder for the first time.

It was this realisation of this unwanted compassion that had him pushing off of the wall and approaching the Slytherin with determination.

The darkness of the dungeons pressed into him as he walked, making him shiver. The foreign territory was unsettling without the distraction of the others.

Why, oh why hadn't he thought about this more carefully? He'd no idea what he was going to say. His one line ice breakers with the girls would hardly be appropriate now.

Severus flipped a page of his book and gave a small grunt of amusement at something, his sour face lighting up briefly as he enjoyed something he'd read.

James swallowed. Since when was Snape so... small?

He shook his head, refusing to let himself become doubt ridden. He was James Potter and this was Snivellus Snape. Was there really any reason to repent?

Severus, sat crouched in a secluded corner of his beloved dungeons, in a world entirely his own, didn't hear James approach until it was too late. His nose was pressed against the Dark Arts book he was absorbed in, as though he longed to fall inside and be consumed by its sinister contents.

James cringed and glanced about him, but the corridor was deserted. He took advantage of that fact while he could; no way did he want to be caught talking to Snape in any manner that wasn't considered completely hostile.

"Alright, Sna... Severus?" he greeted, the name sounding strange and meaningless on his tongue.

Severus jumped up at the sound as though he'd been electrocuted. The book fell from his lap and he scrambled immediately to pick it up again, holding it against his thin chest possessively.

James held in a snort.

"Po... Ja...Ja...Potter," he stammered, dark hair obscuring his face so that he could barely see.  
"What...? Where's...I...I haven't done anything."

"I didn't say you'd done anything," James said with a very forced smile.

Severus glanced back up him cautiously with an involuntary flinch. "But-"

"I just wondered how you were," James added firmly, feeling his palms begin to sweat.

Severus face was lined deeply with confusion, but he found the courage to answer, Lily's words fresh in his mind. "I am... adequate."

Any other day he would have told the idiot to fuck off and walked, or more likely ran away, but he couldn't do that anymore. That reaction would not make James love him.

Unconsciously, he raised his hands to his hair and felt the silky strands, freshly washed with Lily's shampoo. He ran a tongue over his crooked teeth but could find no grime. He was more prepared than he'd ever been to make someone fall for him, but now that he was faced with the flawless, beauty that was James Potter, he felt himself shrink.

His courage failed him and he dropped his eyes to the floor in submission.

"Excellent," James bounced slightly on the balls of his feet, that same tense smile firmly in place.  
"I'm glad to hear it."

There was a pause while James continued with that strange smile, and Severus glanced up at him sideways, completely confused by this unusual interest James was showing in him.

The last time they'd been face to face, it had been the most humiliating moment of his life. Any moment now he would be cursed, Severus knew it. Black and the wolf were hiding somewhere and this was all some sick game to humiliate him.

"What are you reading?" James asked conversationally, feigning interest in Severus's choice of literature.

Severus flushed; he couldn't help it. He could never have envisioned a civil conversation between them if he'd tried.

He had to use this to his advantage. Lily's words came back to him as the silence between them stretched. 'Open up', she had said, and 'tell them about yourself-'

"Sna...Severus?" James frowned when he still hadn't received an answer.

"It's Dark Arts," Severus said quickly, holding the aged book up slightly so James could see. He certainly wasn't much of a conversationalist but if James was talking, he could follow in his lead.

James nodded as though in appreciation, while inwardly feeling sick. The gruesome images on the front cover were enough to make his stomach churn.

James' eyes flickered over the ill looking boy as Severus' gaze returned to the floor, as though afraid to meet his own, even as his jaw was clenched in determination as if he wished for the confidence to do so.

"Any good?" James continued to stare, becoming slightly alarmed at the sight of the slightly smaller boy squeeze his fists at his side, his eyes almost bulging out of his head in apparent

concentration.

"That controversial, eh?" he asked, holding back a snigger.

Severus ignored him, struggling for confidence. He knew that he had to look him in the eye and talk to him like a proper person. A terrifying prospect, which, seeing as he'd been terrorized by James for the past few years, was understandable.

Confidence, Severus thought desperately, confidence. He needed to show some assertiveness or James would never respect..

"It's an interesting read," he answered finally, his voice unnecessarily loud with nerves. "You should read it."

Severus winced. Of course James wouldn't want to read it. He was a Gryffindor, they hated the Dark Arts!

But James feigned interest and politely declined. "Perhaps another time," he smiled, turning Severus' cheeks redder still.

James sighed at Severus's pained expression, his frustration growing as Severus, once again, met his eyes for just a few seconds before dropping his chin.

James felt exceedingly ridiculous, not an emotion he particularly enjoyed, and blamed Severus all the more for it.

He doubted whether Severus thought him at all sincere in his actions. Something inside him snapped as Severus continued to fidget, and he forced himself closer to the Slytherin, trapping him against the wall.

This had worked once before... Snape had been aroused by him. It was not impossible.

He dropped his voice and said huskily in the most seductive demeanour he could muster in the circumstances, "So... Do you wanna take a walk? Or something."

This was seduction. This was the only way James knew. It worked for the less sophisticated girls, the ones that he picked up for a weekend. And if Severus wouldn't talk, and James had no desire to listen, something more physical was their only option.

"Get real, Potter," Snape snarled instinctively, as a familiar wave of hatred crashed over him in immediate response to the other boy's arrogance. He pushed James away from him, before cringing internally.

Great move, Severus, he thought. The guy's practically throwing himself at you and you're pushing him away. But, having actually spoken properly, he found it much easier to be scornful. He crossed his arms over his chest, deciding to test just how far James would take this act.

"Since when have you ever wanted to take a walk with me, Potter?" he mocked, raising a dark eyebrow.

James smirked slightly, point taken, before pushing back closer, to Severus's immense relief. "Since right now."

Severus narrowed his eyes but his blood pressure was increasing significantly. Is this how girls felt when James spoke to them this way? If he'd thought it hot to watch James the other day with that

girl, this was ten times hotter. To be in her position with James looking at him...like that...was indescribable.

The overwhelmed Slytherin shuddered in both delight and distaste with himself for enjoying being in such a position.

"Why?"

He forced the voice of reason to the front of his mind. When were the rest of the marauders to arrive? He didn't have much longer before he'd be cursed.

"I think we both know why, Severus," James whispered, very close to his ear, knowing the sound of his first name, said in this way, would have an effect on the Slytherin. He was right. This time he felt Severus shiver involuntary, no act on his part. The effect James had on him was real.

He cleared his throat and shifted against the weight against him. That was a mistake as it only aroused him further, a point of which, at this close distance, James couldn't possibly have missed.

"So you like me then, Potter?" he kept the conversation going, terrified about what would happen if James found other uses for his mouth. "Even after you caught me watching...when you..."

"What do you think?" James replied readily, disgusted beyond reason by what he was doing, but knowing, in equal measures, that it was necessary. There was also something infinitely amusing at seeing Severus so uncomfortable. "I've been so stupid all these years, Severus..." he continued regretfully. If only the cameras were on him now, he'd win a few well deserved acting awards. "I haven't seen you for the great...intelligent...sexy..." His mind went into overdrive, trying to think of any more positive points to attach to this guy.

"Never mind that now..." he said quickly, diverting the subject as he came up empty. "Just...Be with me? It's all I want. I didn't know you felt...the same as I do, until the other day. You should have told me before. I didn't know how to react at first, but now... now I want to respond."

"And what is it exactly you want to do with me, James?" Sirius dragged out the word, with his own obvious attempt at seduction. This was his chance and it may be his only one.

James cringed. If he wasn't mistaken, Severus was actually attempting to smile at him. Again. It was a ghastly sight.

"Urm..." James answered, trying to back track a little and put a bit more distance between him and the Slytherin without being noticed. "That depends..." he forced himself to continue what he had began as it was, surprisingly, working so well. "What do you want me to do?"

Severus's couldn't believe his ears. This just kept getting better and better. A million and one different dreams, fantasies he'd had regarding James Potter flashed across his mind. He swallowed. This couldn't be real.

James meanwhile was collecting himself for the inevitable. Severus continued to look up at him with a small sly smile tugging at his lips. James groaned and did the only thing he could think of to do in his desperation for something, anything, to break the tension.

He kissed him.

Severus immediately froze, paralyzed with shock and pure fear. James Potter was kissing him! Now he knew he was dreaming; he'd passed out and was living in one of his stupid little fantasies. It was the only plausible explanation.

Why else would James willingly kiss him?

Contemplating the wet tongue that ghosted across his tightly sealed lips, Severus felt himself quiver, tentatively raising his hands to rest on James' shoulders. They hovered for a few, awkward moments, mere inches from contact, and then dropped back to his side.

James moved his own lips against Severus's motionless, cold ones for a few agonizing moments before he was forced to pull back. Their eyes met and neither could deny the discomfort.

James swallowed, his eyes wandering down to the lips he had just held in his teeth, and winced at how dry and chapped they were. Forcing himself not to gag, he dragged Severus forward again, clamped his eyes shut and with a pure force of determination, captured the Slytherin's lips once again in his own.

James' pride stated that the Slytherin at least had to enjoy it.

He mused at the taste of the other boy...It was not completely unpleasant, he had to admit, and those lips had become warmer, softer against his own. His lips curved into a smirk as he felt the Slytherin shudder beneath him, as he finally relented and began to feel the enjoyable effects that a kiss could have.

Severus still struggled in James's grasp and grabbed frantically at the wall behind him, searching for something, anything to hold on to, terrified to touch James who continued to administer such sweet torture, biting gently on his lower lip, encouraging him to reciprocate.

James kissed Severus relentlessly and thoroughly. As much as Severus tried, he could not become hold his own in the encounter. He was being attacked ruthlessly and somewhat passionately, whether fueled by desire or hate filled anger he did not know or care. He emitted small moans and sounds of pleasure, which if they'd come from anyone else, James would have found a turn on.

When James finally pulled back, Severus blinked slowly a few times and licked his lips, his eyes glazed and unfocused.

"Wha...why...?" he stammered, his mind hazy.

James fought the urge to wipe his mouth on his sleeve vigorously.

Severus cleared his throat and James's attention was re-averted to him. He took in the others slightly parted lips and his lust filled eyes, filled with confusion and desire, with satisfaction. That was it, James thought in triumph, as he took a conscious step back. He was sure he'd done it. Snape loved him! He'd kissed Severus Snape and he wasn't throwing up.

He marveled at his own achievement but it wasn't long before he felt hands weave their way into his robes. Severus was pulling him closer again, breathing all over his face.

James recoiled slightly and felt himself flinch against the unwanted attention, though he allowed himself to be pulled yet closer, until their faces were once again just inches apart.

Appalled with himself, he brushed his lips against Severus's in the briefest of kisses, reveling in the small gasp from the other boy. He smirked slightly. He'd been right. How could he resist? How could anyone resist? He had the guy hooked. He should leave now...but one thing held him back...He wanted to taste those lips one more time, curious as to just how much more he could get from the Slytherin.

He crushed his lips to Severus's, thrusting his tongue against his thin ones impatiently.

"Kiss me back..." he demanded, forcing himself closer still until they were pressed tightly together. As as he did so, he felt something press against his stomach. Immediately, James pulled back in surprise.

Severus was hard.

A spark of arousal shot through James's body as he acknowledged this. It was maddening that he should feel that way, but he couldn't deny his reaction to being able to manipulate this boy, usually so cold and unfeeling, with such ease, and to have him mold to him in such a delectable fashion.

His own body's similar interest surprised him immensely, and though he was not as obviously turned on as Severus was, he was still very aware of the pleasure he felt in doing this.

"It's alright. Don't be embarrassed." He titled Severus' chin up as the boy glowed scarlet and pushed against him, obviously humiliated and desperate to get away, but James would not allow it. He had Severus where he needed him and he wasn't letting go now to have to start this all over again.

"This isn't like last time," he assured him, remembering their chance encounter in the corridor not long ago. "I'm the same. I want this."

Severus felt the tingling sensation to race all the way down his spine and finally complied with James's command, responding tentatively to his renewed kisses. His incompetence, however, soon became very apparent as James was forced to take complete control, leading Severus. He could only feel and submit to such foreign sensations.

It really was the most awful kiss that the experienced Gryffindor had ever endured. But equally so, it was the most thrilling, and he feared its end when he'd have to account for his impulsive, contradictory actions.

James ran his seeker hands up Severus sides, emitting a shiver from the other, and pushed them up further up into his dark hair. It felt smooth and silky, not at all greasy as he'd always imagined, and smelt strangely of Lily Evans.. He pushed that thought from his mind, concentrating on the task at hand.

It was Severus who broke the kiss the next time. He wouldn't be just another notch in his bedpost, a cast away from one of his hundreds of one night stands. No, this had to last longer for James to actually love him and that needed to happen for the Gryffindor to risk kissing him in public, which was essential to his plan.

Pushing his self restraint to the limit, he detangled himself from the panting Gryffindor and straightened his robes.

James, snapping abruptly back to reality as the cold air of the dungeon cooled his heated face, hastily took a step back, horrified to find that he was as out of breath just as much as Severus was.

Taking in the others flushed face and swollen lips, he knew he'd look the exact same. It was as though someone had slapped him in the face and reminded him exactly what he'd been doing. He could not blame this on anyone but himself, he'd initiated the kiss... demanded it.

"I have to go," he breathed in a sudden rush of panic, his arousal withering abruptly as realisation dawned. He brushed himself down with a grimace as though he'd been contaminated, berating himself for getting so carried away and allowing his hormones to rule him. He needed to go...now.

"I'll...I'll talk to you later Sna..Sni...whatever!" he called over his shoulder as he practically ran out

of the dungeons and up towards the bright lights of the Entrance Hall.

Severus licked his lips slowly as he watched the retreating back of James Potter. He gave a small satisfied smile and ran his hands through his slick hair, just like James had so gloriously done just a few minutes ago.

He was going to buy Lily Evans a mansion. He'd even paint it top to bottom in Gryffindor colours if she asked him to. It had all worked. James Potter would be his...It hadn't been a prank. The marauders hadn't turned up, and therefore, James must like him. Really like him.

Though Severus was unable to comprehend to any degree why this might be, as he was sure his minor makeover couldn't have done all the work and his barely coherent babbling was nothing to be proud of, he felt oddly elated and self-satisfied at his achievement.

His plan was working.

...

James didn't stop running until he reached the seventh floor.

It must be a dominance thing, he thought, there was no other reason for it...but damn. James brought his fist to his forehead and scrunched up his face and swore. He couldn't deny the spark between them but where the hell had that come from? He didn't get it with everyone and it had been a long time since he'd felt it but back there with Snape, that was more than he'd ever had to deal with at once before and it had completely thrown him off balance.

"Alright there love?" asked the fat lady, interrupting his thoughts, watching him curiously from her portrait. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

She laughed loudly at her own joke. "A ghost..." she giggled. "Get it? The castle is full of-"

"Puking Pasties," James snapped impatiently.

"Yes, but-"

"Puking Pasties!" he repeated more loudly, in no mood for her pointless nattering today. "Can't you just let me in?"

"Oh, alright," she huffed, swinging open obligingly. "No need to be like that."

"Thanks," he muttered as he stepped through massaging his aching head, not having any emotion left to feel at all guilty for his impatience.

"You're back early," Remus said immediately. "What happened?" he asked quickly with biting impatience. Naturally, he feared the worst.

James shook his head, unable to produce coherently in a sentence what had just happened. Where did he start? How much should he tell them?

Remus took in his friend's wide eyed, shaken expression and swollen lips and a horrifying thought crossed his mind.

"Oh no.. You didn't... Tell me you didn't go straight for the kiss."

James's eyes snapped to him and he winced against the accusation.

"Is it that obvious?" he asked in a quiet voice, half turning back towards the opening of the portrait. He shouldn't have come here first, what was he thinking? He should have composed himself. He should've-

"James, you idiot!" Remus cried in despair. "What on earth were you thinking?"

James moaned as Remus half pulled, half pushed him into the nearest chair but any resistance in him quickly died and let himself be led, feeling void of any more energy. He was so confused. Confused and disgusted with himself; he felt so dirty.

Sirius sat up straighter from where he sat playing chess with Peter. "You kissed him?"

James grimaced, with feeling, then nodded. "A proper, full on, tongues kiss," he said, deliberating slowly each word, with such a look of disgust and incredibility that his friends had no doubt that he'd done it.

"No way!" Sirius cried, making a sickened sound in his throat. "I was only joking! You didn't have to actually kiss him! Not yet."

"I panicked," James croaked. "I didn't know what else to do...he wouldn't listen to me and I just...I don't know what the hell happened. I was desperate!"

Remus shook his head in despair. "For one so popular with the women you really have no idea do you-?"

"And when was the last time you had a girlfriend, Remus?" James retorted hurtfully, feeling on edge. "I don't see you out kissing anyone."

James felt the adrenaline pounding in his veins, that remained from his earlier encounter with Snape, and he knew that it was this talking but he refused to feel guilty. It wasn't as though Remus was in his position. It wasn't as though Remus had to kiss stupid Snape. He had no idea how it felt.

Remus blushed furiously and looked away.

"Come on guys," Sirius stood up sharply to move between them, giving James a warning look. "Calm down, Prongs, alright? It's over. We're not falling out over this."

James sighed but nodded with a muttered apology in Remus's direction. Arguing would get them nowhere and after all he did need their help. He'd learnt now that he couldn't do this without them. He'd be a fool to go it alone.

But first they had to understand. "Mooney...he kissed me back."

Remus's eyes shot back up and they all gawped at him, open mouthed, before Sirius began applauding loudly. "I told you he was irresistible!" he cried gleefully, clapping him on the back. "You've done it!"

"So, you're going out with Snivelly now?" Peter asked with a disgusted look. "What? You can do way better than him James..."

James rolled his eyes. "Does he even know wha...never mind. The main thing is, I think I have him. It was as though he already wanted it. I hardly had to do a thing. He was all over me."

Remus watched him carefully. "That's bizarre," he muttered, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Are you sure there was nothing else going on?" he asked slowly. "He had no ulterior motives? He

didn't try to hex you or anything."

"Nope," James answered, "he was all for it and it's not like Snape can act. He wanted it. He wanted it bad, I could tell."

Sirius swore. "I can't believe Snape had the fucking hots for you all this time and we never knew. We could have used it against him so many times...Blimey, James. We should have known he was gay-"

"Quiet, Sirius," Remus motioned him to silence with an impatient wave of his hand, a serious look on his face. He turned back to James. "Snape hates you," he said slowly, thoughtfully. "He hates all of us. Well, at least we all thought he did...this should have been no easy task...and before you get too carried away, James, this is far from over. One kiss doesn't solve this. There is much more to do yet before the Vow can be completed."

"What do you mean?" James asked, annoyed. "Plenty of girls I've kissed love me! What more does he need?"

"Not love, James..." Remus sighed, exasperated. "lust. Not love. And if you want to get Snape to love you, you'll need to do a lot more than simply kiss him."

"Go on then, Mooney," James sighed in return, "tell me what I need to do. I know you're bursting to."

"For a start, Snape is not a girl!" Remus cried immediately, almost hysterically. "So can we all please stop referring to him as one. He's a bloke, James and we've got to start seeing him as one or this will never work!"

"There's a difference?" James asked, feeling a headache coming on. It was all the same to him. Somebody was either fuckable or they weren't.

"Yes, there's a difference," Remus answered, closing his eyes for a moment as if in pain. "He will respond to different things, so we need to try a new approach. From now on you're not doing another thing unless you clear it with me first."

"What?" James grinned. "You gonna mentor me, Mooney? Give me Snape love lessons?"

"I if I must..." Remus replied stiffly. "But no more kissing James! Not until you form a proper relationship with him."

James gave him an odd look. "You say that like it's gonna be hard..."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "Well...as you said, Snape enjoyed you kissing him. It may not be long before he's back for more..."

Sirius let out a bark of laughter at this. "Unlucky, Prongs..."

Remus shook his head. "If what James says is true...what Snape's feeling is probably just lust. You're an attractive guy, James," he said simply, "but to get him to love you, the whole point of this may I remind you, you're going to have to do more than molest him down a darkened corridor..."

"I did not-" James cried indignantly but Remus knew him better.

"I have no doubt..." he drawled, "but from now on you have to be different or Snape will never

develop any true feelings for you. You need to show him you're not just an arrogant, big headed bully that he certainly thinks you are. You've made his life a living hell for the last five years, it won't be that easy! There is far too much ill-feeling between the two of you."

Sirius snorted and shared a grin with James. "You can say that again."

Remus gave them a disapproving look but didn't say anything more.

"Wanna play some quidditch?" Sirius asked casually, becoming bored with the current conversation. "The pitch is free. We can practice some of those new moves we learnt the other day."

"Sure," James replied with a shrug. "I'll just go get my stuff..."

"Guys!" Remus cried in disbelief. "We need to talk about this. James come on, take this seriously. I thought you said you wanted help. Prongs come back...!"

"I will, Mooney," he assured him, though Remus was far from convinced. "After flying, ok?"

Remus kept up his protest but James didn't respond any further. He wanted to put the whole sorry affair with Snape out of his mind for a while, at least until it made more sense. He needed to clear his head and banish that kiss from his mind.

He grabbed his broomstick and left the common room without so much as a backward glance.

Sirius shrugged at a fuming Remus, and gave a what would be apologetic expression, before following close behind.

...

Lily Evans made her way back up to Gryffindor tower that evening amid her usual cluster of friends. It had been a long day. All she could think of was climbing into her four poster bed and sleeping soundlessly, putting all her worries about homework, boys and everything else out of her mind for a few precious hours.

A consistent tug on her sleeve brought her out of her day-dreaming and she looked down in mild irritation to find one of her friends trying to get her attention. She was staring at something with a confused expression.

"What?" she asked, stifling a yawn. "What is it?"

"Is that your Slytherin friend?" her friend asked with a small frown. "The one you're always talking to? The one who no one likes?"

Lily turned round, determinedly dismissing her friend's ignorant comments as she had time and time again asked her not to be so mean, to no avail and expected to see Severus, but the boy sauntering across the opposite corridor couldn't possibly be him. He looked far too content, far too pleased with himself to be her Severus.

"I don't think so..." she answered slowly, squinting to see better the mysterious figure, who she noted had very good posture.

The boy in question looked up as they approached and gave her a small discreet wave. Lily's eyebrows shot up as she took in those familiar features.

"Oh my..." she gasped in realisation.

Before she could so much as utter a word, Severus had disappeared down towards the dungeons, whistling contentedly, very out of tune. She shook her head slightly in and looked back at her friend who just snorted loudly and headed off up the stairs to catch up with the rest of the group.

Lily hesitated however, smiling softly with affection at the place Severus had disappeared.

Whoever this mystery woman was, she was one lucky girl. She just wished she knew who it was that had such a hold over Severus. She narrowed her eyes slightly in curiosity and vowed to find out.

...

James threw himself onto his bed that night, exhausted after his mini quidditch match with Sirius and an over-excited Peter. As sleep gradually crept over him, he found his mind wandering back to his little meeting with Severus that morning, despite his eagerness to forget it.

The meeting had certainly gone as well as he could have hoped, though he had to admit that he was slightly surprised at the willingness on Severus's part...It was suspicious yet he did not dwell on it. What was it to him if the snake already had a crush on him? It would only make his job that much easier.

James turned over, burying his head in a pillow. That kiss kept replaying in his mind. He knew it should make him feel sick but he felt nothing but intrigue and an intense desire to investigate this new feeling the Slytherin had invoked in him.

Snape's clumsy lips under his own, warm and soft and oh so innocent. He'd never felt superiority like it, and it was addictive. He had, though he'd die before he told Sirius, gained some profound pleasure in kissing Severus Snape.

If the opportunity presented itself again James didn't know whether he'd have the strength to refuse the temptation... He shifted restlessly but the images were stuck in his mind, as clear and detailed as if it had happened just seconds ago, not hours.

When he closed his eyes and sleep called upon him, it was Severus Snape's face he saw inches from his own.

Despite himself and everything he held against the insufferable Slytherin, James found himself excited, while equally fearful, at the prospect of their next meeting.

Severus, at the other end of the castle, was contemplating the exact same thing.

## Chapter 5

Tuesday passed slowly and without event, which after the drama of the last few days, was a great disappointment to James. He'd been anticipating a second run in with Snape since their last encounter, with all sorts of mischievous scenarios concocting themselves in his mind.

He was interested to know whether their kiss had worked any long lasting magic on the snarky Slytherin.

Snape was not an admirer he wanted, in an ideal situation, though he found himself thanking his lucky stars in the circumstances. James would enjoy manipulating these existing emotions into those far more dangerous.

However, the implications of the bet were also weighing heavily on his mind. He was eager for its conclusion, impatient to resume some sort of carefree normality in his life. It was getting very dull, constantly discussing plans and strategies with Remus. If he was told to be careful one more time, he'd start throwing curses.

During his free periods, James searched the school high and low for Severus, leaving no suit of armour, statue or stray curtain unchecked, though his efforts were wasted.

Severus' current absence from the corridors was unnatural, but not entirely unexpected. James came up with a reason easily enough. Severus was avoiding him. Understandable really. The poor boy was obviously terrified, having received his first ever kiss from the most unlikely person.

It was to his immense frustration that Severus hadn't appeared at breakfast that next morning. As none of his lessons were with the Slytherin that day, and lunch had failed to unite them, dinner was James' last opportunity to catch him before curfew.

He made his way to the Great Hall that evening, earlier than he would have done, settling himself in between two of the prettiest girls on the row, without much thought, and joining in their mindless conversation.

Sirius and Remus arrived not long after, also curious as to the developments that were to take place should their favourite Slytherin decide to show himself.

They breathed out a sigh of relief as one when, after a tense half an hour, a familiar figure finally appeared in the doorway. James eyes narrowed with curiosity as Severus edged into the room, somehow appearing to blend in with his surroundings, rather than shine out from the crowd.

His black eyes were barely visible through the hair that obscured his face, though it was obvious Severus was peering towards the Gryffindor table. James raised his head a little higher, waiting for Severus to find him.

When their eyes met, like clockwork, Severus' pale, hooked nose face took on a deep red and he ducked his head, hurrying to take his seat at the Slytherin table.

Sirius snickered into his goblet of pumpkin juice and James grinned, his strong streak of arrogance allowing him a moment of pride at his achievement. He'd been right. Severus was embarrassed and most likely fearful. It was one thing when he had girls falling over their feet for him, but seeing those sallow cheeks warm on the sight of him was something else.

Remus looked between his friends, disapproving of their amusement. An unreadable look passed

across his prematurely lined face as he eyed Severus' tense shoulders. "What on earth have you done to him, James?" he muttered. "He can't even look at you."

James just shrugged, suppressing a smile.

Remus' face darkened visibly and his voice was full of anxiety, as he leaned across the table to whisper caution "Don't scare him. Please," he warned. "Don't rush this. Not when there's still time. If you frighten him off now, I don't know how long it'll take for him to trust us."

"I know, Remus, I know," James assured him, eyes fixed on the back of a greasy head. "But you two have your parts as well remember? Sirius?"

Sirius rolled his eyes and nodded with a dismissive wave of his hand. Being nice to someone like Severus did not come easily to him, but he accepted that it would be required in order for him to get close to James.

"I've hardly even spoken to the guy," Remus muttered, pushing his food around his plate. "I'm not the one who has to-"

James eyes snapped up as a thought crossed his mind. "Yeah... You've never jinxed him," he interrupted. "He probably hasn't got anything against you, Mooney. You can buddy up to him too and tell him what a great guy I am!"

Remus let out a short laugh. There was a note of self disgust in his voice as he answered, "And all those times I've just left him to your mercy, I'm sure he really loves me for that."

Dinner passed much slower after that. James sat impatiently, waiting for his cue to act, a cluster of nerves twisting their way into his stomach.

Finally, when he was beginning to get on everybody's nerves, he got his chance.

"Ah, I gotta go." James cut smoothly across Sirius's rant on his favourite subject: girls, which just so happened to be a different one every week. He had a more scandalous reputation than even James did when it came to the opposite sex.

James rose quickly to his feet, his cutlery falling to the table with a loud clutter. Remus gave a worried look before smiling a reluctant "good luck", as James strode purposely in the direction of the door, leaving the majority of his dinner untouched.

"We won't wait up," Sirius called to his retreating back, clearly amused.

James soon disappeared within the crowds, and edged his way out of the Great Hall before anyone could try and engage him in conversation.

Severus was already halfway across the foyer, but in a few long strides, James had caught up and was speaking in his ear.

"Hey, gorgeous."

Severus whipped round, wand hand shooting up.

James held back a snort at his defensiveness. He knew Severus couldn't protect himself against a mushroom, let alone him. The smaller boy had proven just the other day how false his hard front was. James had seen his vulnerability first hand and it was that side of Severus he needed. The one he could manipulate. This cold, hard front would need to be penetrated.

"How are you?" James asked pleasantly, mimicking his words from the other day, hoping to ignite a similar atmosphere between them again so that he could analyse these feelings more carefully.

Severus cleared his throat and forcibly relaxed his features, his fierce look dematerializing as quickly as it appeared. He made an attempt to move his curtain of hair out of his face a fraction, so that James could see his face. It took a lot of courage, a bravery that Severus called on only in extreme circumstances, to expose himself in this way. But it would be worth it...in the end.

"I am fine..." he answered with controlled calm, his eyes darting round the Entrance Hall in search of the rest of the marauders. His suspicions of James were at their highest, as always, and he doubted they'd ever dissipate. "And yourself?"

"Not too bad," James gave him a small smile, wondering what was going on behind his impenetrable facade. He took it as an encouraging sign that Snape was prepared to be slightly more open with him. He barely saw the boy's sallow cheeks appear from behind those lank strands of hair, and now that his face was more visible, he looked even unhealthier than he remembered.

James wondered momentarily whether Snape was ill or whether he always looked this way...this wasted.

"What is it you want?" Severus asked, drawing James from his thoughts, his lack of social life made evident as even in his desire to be civil, he had little experience of how to proceed.

"You weren't so dismissive the other day," James raised his eyebrows, picking up on the tone instantly, a teasing smile playing about his lips.

Severus's own thin lips twitched in recollection but he gave nothing away, still too cautious to allow for natural behaviour. James could see the doubt and distrust playing around the back of those obsidian eyes and the stiffness in his shoulders. He needed to put a stop to it if they were to get anywhere at the speed he needed them to.

'There is no love without trust...' Remus had said and James now saw the truth in this. He desperately needed Snape to completely trust him or they'd never pass this stage of constantly second guessing each other.

He glanced quickly about him but the entrance hall was empty, the rest of the school was lingering in the Great Hall, chatting and eating without a care in the world, but still he could see it was not private enough for Severus.

"Come on," James insisted, reaching forwards to take one of Severus's clammy hands. "Let's go over here."

He saw the hesitation and forced himself to be patient. James tugged lightly on his hand and gave a small encouraging smile. He knew the boy was tempted and that was all he needed. He'd had years in practice, manipulating and seducing people to his will.

"Trust me..." he urged, putting all his efforts in appearing the picture of innocence. He should have felt shameful when those trusting eyes, full of all their innocence and vulnerability, so open to his abuse, warmed a little and permitted, but he didn't.

James knew, as he led the slightly smaller boy into an alcove, that as immediately as Snape had given his consent something had changed. Severus had put himself entirely in his hands. He was at his mercy.

He must really have some hard feelings for him...Why else would this boy, who he enjoyed

making so utterly miserable, allow him to control him this way? It gave James an odd sense of guilty pleasure and though his conscience opposed, he relished in the power.

Severus found himself trapped between James and the wall, a tanned arm braced against the bricks either side of his head. He briefly tried to convince himself that it was fear keeping him motionless and unresisting but as James leaned in closer, his soft breath caressing his face as he spoke, he knew it wasn't true.

"...Severus?"

"Wha...?" Severus came out of his stupor with a small shake of his head.

James grinned down at him and Severus's stomach did a back flip, very aware of how close they were together. He couldn't be more thankful to Lily right now for insisting he start brushing his teeth.

"I said..." James leaned back in with a whisper. "I've been thinking about you..." It wasn't really a lie... If Severus chose to decide he was implying something he wasn't, how was that his fault?

A shiver ran down Severus's spine and he attempted to put some distance between James's toned, muscular body and his smaller, feebler one. There was still a confusing measure of hatred, making his nearness to James almost unbearable, but this was somewhat fazed by lust and made it hard to separate between the two.

"Really?"

"Mmm...Hmm," James hummed, "now why don't you say hello to me properly?"

His face became nothing more than a blur to Severus as he reached in and brushed a feather light kiss on his slightly chapped lips.

He lingered for a few moments and then pulled back and considered how he felt. He felt perfectly fine until a small, almost inaudible whimper from Severus reached his ears. Then his stomach was turning and his jaw clenched in opposition to the delight this sound caused him.

He sighed and pulled away further. He was a sick man indeed to enjoy such a thing. Severus had a small frown on his face and James could tell than inwardly he was begging to be touched, to be made to feel wanted again. But he needed his heart, not his body after all and kept his palms firmly pressed to the wall. He decided for once to take Remus's advice and approach things in a less physical manner.

"So, why haven't I seen you all day?" James asked, keeping himself focused, his voice neutral, while ensuring that he still had the authority in the conversation. "You're not avoiding me are you, Severus?"

"Avoiding you?" Severus stared back, ejecting some much needed confidence into his voice like Lily had instructed. "It would be impossible to avoid you in this school, James Potter. You're practically everywhere, if not in person then hanging off every other person's thoughts."

"You think so?" James raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "And you're reluctant to be one of them is that it?"

Severus narrowed his eyes slightly. "How can you be so sure of yourself? Maybe I am not interested in you at all." He couldn't help baiting the boy, if but for a moment, denying him the one thing that, for some ridiculous reason, he seemed desperate for.

"Don't lie to me," James spoke softly, a small smile pulling at his lips. "You kissed back. I know you enjoyed kissing me, Severus Snape."

Severus swallowed. If only James knew just how much. It was hard to feel so unattractive and repulsive when James Potter was giving you that look; the one that he usually saved for his longer than weekend girlfriends.

James smirked fully now, satisfied at the reaction. "Thought so..." he murmured leaning in again, tantalizingly close, but pulling away abruptly before their lips could connect, teasing the Slytherin and convincing him that he wanted it.

"But you never liked me before..." Snape said, resisting the distraction. It would seem more than suspicious if he did not at least keep asking how this considerable change had come about.

"Why must you question everything?" James frowned. "The world works in strange ways, I suppose. I only just realised how I really felt. Haven't I shown you already that you can trust me? That I more than like you?"

"You like a lot of people James Potter and I doubt I am one of them."

"You think so? ...Then what can I do to convince you?" Before Severus could resist James brought up one of his hands, leaving the other firmly held against the wall, and lightly traced the line of his cheek, feigning all the adoration he could muster.

Severus shivered and recoiled from the touch, though the resistance in his posture weakened more and, subconsciously, he leaned into the touch and all the warmth that it brought.

The look that passed across Severus's features made James wonder as to whether he'd ever been touched this way before, if not by a lover then by a parent in an act of affection and unconditional love. Did he have a family? Who out there in the world gave a shit about his boy in front of him? Anyone at all?

James became abruptly aware that his thumb was tracing a light pattern on his new companion's face and he quickly snapped it away, having brought a level of intentness to this meeting that he had not wanted or expected.

He couldn't afford to think that way, in any depth, about Snape. He was an object. An object that he must manipulate and use in order to save his life. He couldn't be anything else.

A look of disappointment passed across Severus's face but it was smothered seconds later by his much more favourable, defensive expression and he watched James with wary eyes.

"What do you want from me?"

James lips tilted into a half smile. "That depends entirely..." He answered vaguely. "How much will you give me, Severus? Do you want to be mine? Would you prefer it is I were yours alone and that no one else had rights to me?...Is that what you want?"

James could tell by the quickening of Severus's breath that he'd said the right thing.

"Half the school fancies you, Potter," Severus answered, having already prepared such an answer. "Why wouldn't I also?"

Seconds passed as their gazes held, each trying to work out what the other was really thinking. James was caught off guard for a moment, as Severus finally held his gaze, by how black his eyes

were. He could not even see the pupils they were so dark. Why hadn't he noticed before? They were the most prominent thing about him.

"So, Potter do you want to—" Severus began, uncomfortable under the scrutiny and having apparently reached a conclusion.

The doors to the Great Hall swung open, cutting his sentence short. With a din of loud voices, pupils began filing out, the loudest of the voices being only too familiar.

With a small intake of breath, Severus ducked under James's arms and disappeared in the direction of the dungeons without a backwards glance.

James hissed in frustration, moving away from the wall to the sounds of laughter.

"Did we scare him away?" Sirius looked delighted. "What did you say to him? When are you seeing him again?"

James shot an irritated glance at him, feeling extremely off put.

...

The rest of the week passed in a similar pattern. James would catch glimpses of Severus in the corridors, in classes, in the dinner hall, but it wasn't enough. They had no time to talk...to really talk, which was, in Remus's opinion, exactly what they needed to do.

The effects of the kiss had quickly worn off on James and he now found the whole situation more irritating than anything. It was entertaining, he'd admit, but as time passed he became more and more aware of his own morality and the increased danger it was in each day when Snape was not within his reach.

There were, however, encouraging signs that suggested his attempts had not been a complete failure. Severus seemed to be spending more time with Lily Evans than before and by the look on his face whenever James caught them together, they were talking about him, whether Lily knew it or not.

James would find Severus, more often than not, staring at him with this determined expression but it would flicker and die whenever their eyes met. James just wished he knew what was going on inside the boy's head. He'd never even thought that there may be more to Severus Snape than a grouchy, awkward personality and revolting features...

It was becoming more of an obsession than a challenge to work him out.

...

Thursday evening was a quiet night for the marauders. The week was quickly coming to an end, and they'd yet to come up with a successful strategy to develop the relationship between James and Severus in a positive direction.

"You know what you need, don't you?" Remus spoke for the first time that evening, his eyes bright with sudden, unexpected inspiration as he addressed them beside their usual places by the common room fire.

"What?" James looked up.

"A date," Remus answered simply. "I don't know why we didn't think of this sooner..."

Silence followed this idea before it was broken by Sirius's loud howls of laughter.

James face broke out into a reluctant smile and he gave Sirius a half-hearted nudge and reprimanding look.

"Really, Remus?" he forced his face straight. "A date?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, I think if you could just...shut up, Sirius...I think we've been going about this the complete wrong way. I think you're scaring him...intimidating him. He feels pressured and he's probably completely unsure about what you're true intentions are. You need to show him you're honest in what you're feeling-"

"But I'm not," James cut in, deadpanned. "I don't want to date, Snape."

Remus clenched his jaw as Sirius laughed louder. James allowed a moment of sympathy for the werewolf. He had been very tense lately and this was, as he knew, all because of him and the concern Remus had for him, so he smothered his own amusement for his sake.

"I know," Remus answered, hiding his aggravation well. "But you need to convince him otherwise or this will never work. If you could get him alone for more than a few moments you'll be giving yourself a much greater chance of success."

"Honestly, Remus," Sirius clutched his sides. "A date? With Snape? James would be the laughing stock of the school...not even I would be able to look him in the eye after that..."

"No one has to see them together," Remus assured him, with an irritated glance at Sirius. "You can go somewhere private. There are plenty of places..."

James rubbed a hand over his face, not liking the sound of this at all. "I dunno, Mooney...An actual date? What the hell would we talk about?"

"How about...school? Or literature? Politics? World affairs...?" Remus replied readily but trailed off at the expression on James's face. "Ok, maybe not...but I'm sure there are plenty of things you could say. This is your chance to clear the air and gain his trust and his approval. Find some common ground. There must be something you two agree on! If anyone else has any better ideas..."

"Yeah I do," Sirius put his hand up, in a classroom fashion. "How about we double date? I'll go with Peter!"

"Don't be so immature," Remus snapped, though his lips also twitched. "A date with Snape, James? This Hogsmeade weekend...What do you say?"

James sighed and ran a hand through his unruly hair. "Do I have a choice?"

Friday: Lesson 1- Potions (Gryffindor and Slytherin)- James read with mixed feelings.

Today was the day he would ask Severus Snape out on a date.

Dates were usually a bore and a necessity to get into girls pants but this time he would really need to try.

"What are you smiling at?"

James turned round and let his eyes roam lazily over the red headed beauty that was approaching

him, with a suspicious gleam in her eye. 'About how fucking amazing it will be when I humiliate the pants off your slimy little Slytherin friend actually,' James thought but cleared his throat before answering seriously.

"Morning, Evans," he drawled, taking a bite of the marmalade toast he'd taken with him from the Great Hall. "I was just thinking about how beautiful our children will be."

He ignored her snort with good humour and took another large bite. "And how are you this morning?" he asked with a crooked smile.

Lily rolled eyes. "Save it for your blonde bimbos, James. I'm not interested in your games."

James just smiled wider, too used to her scathing comments to take them to heart anymore. "Whatever you say, Evans."

Lily was forced to keep pace with him as they were both headed back towards Gryffindor tower, but she looked pointedly in the opposite direction to him, something which James picked up on very quickly, much to his amusement.

"So..." he said conversationally, throwing the remainder of his toast to the side of the corridor and brushing the crumbs from his hands. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

Lily gave him a disapproving look and cleaned his mess up with a flick of her wand. James grinned but she refused to be embarrassed.

"You're not setting a good example," she muttered.

James just shrugged and prompted her to answer his question.

Lily sighed and answered reluctantly. "I'm worried about Severus."

James frowned. "Oh, you mean Snivel-" he corrected himself hastily as a deep scowl darkened her features. "Sorry, I meant Snape." He smiled apologetically.

"His name's Severus, James, it wouldn't hurt you to use it," she said stiffly.

They turned up a flight of stairs, crossing the second floor corridor full of sleepy fourth years making their way down to breakfast. James eyed a few of them with interest, and Lily looked at him for a moment in disbelief before dragging him forwards.

"You're unbelievable, you know that?" she snapped. "Do you have any manners?"

"So, why are you worried about him?" James asked, quickly diverting the subject and suppressing a chuckle at her outraged expression.

"He seems...different," she answered thoughtfully, a concerned frown creasing her forehead.

"Different how?" James asked, wondering if it had anything to do with him.

"I dunno...he just seems...pleased about something...happy even," she said thoughtfully.

It was James's turn to give her a look of disbelief. "Lil's, that guy wouldn't know happiness if it slapped him in the face. He's a moron."

James realized he may have gone too far when Lily stopped dead in her tracks and threw him a look that could kill.

"Look," he said hastily, holding his hands up. "I haven't done anything. It's nothing to do with me. I don't even like the gu-"

"Exactly!" she hissed, eyeing him with such intense dislike that he winced. "He's different in a good way, Potter. I think I know why...but not who and I don't want you and your pathetic gang to ruin that for him. He deserves to be happy."

"Evans, what are you talking about?" James feigned ignorance, ignoring the slight swell in his chest as she said this and knowing the cause even if she didn't. "He doesn't seem any different to me-"

"That's because you look no further than people's appearances, Potter. You're callous and you're shallow and you wouldn't know humanity if it slapped you in the face. Just leave him alone... please," she practically begged and for a moment James felt his grin falter. "Even you have a heart."

"Oi," he frowned, rather shocked by her sudden outburst. "That's harsh, Evans."

She continued to stare at him, looking for some sort of compassion he was sure.

"Ok," he replied eventually just to please her. It wasn't as though he had any intention of hurting Snape until this whole mess was over anyway. For the moment, he was safe.

"But you have to do something for me," he added slyly.

Surprise showed clearly on her face, she hadn't been expecting that.

"...What do you want?" she asked cautiously.

James looked at her for a few moments and said completely seriously. "Marry me."

He hardly had time to blink before she was storming up off the corridor muttering to herself furiously. James let out a low laugh, unperturbed, wondering what he would have done had she actually said yes.

He jogged the last few steps to his dorm, suddenly eager in his anticipation for the day ahead. He opened the door to his room and almost tripped over Sirius, slouched over his trunk scribbling furiously.

"Leave your homework to the last minute again, Padfoot?" James asked with a grin, moving across the room to shove his day's books into his rucksack.

Sirius grunted, eyes not leaving the parchment. James shook his head in amusement and threw himself onto his bed. They still had a few minutes until lessons started.

He gave Sirius as long as he could but, as he checked his watch for the final time, he decided it was time to hurry his friend along. "Come on mate, we're gonna be late. You know what Slughorn's like. If your name's not Lily Evans you'll be in detention for a week for being late."

"Evans would never be late," Sirius muttered, adding the finishing touches.

"No you're right," James said with a fond smile. "Ready?"

"Yup," Sirius grinned, slinging his bag over his shoulder and eyeing his homework with pride.

"They're going to realise that you're using a charmed quill one of these days you know," James

commented lightly as they made their way down the winding staircase, voice void of any reprimand.

Sirius just shrugged and dug a hand deep into his pocket.

"Got a present for you," he said casually as they walked quickly in the direction of their first class.

"Oh yeah?" James raised an eyebrow taking the pink, flavoured piece of parchment with a grimace.

Sirius flicked open the envelope and handed it to him. James frowned and quickly read its contents.

Dear Beloved

Come on a date with me. This weekend. Please. Just you me and Hogsmeade, it's more than I could ever ask for. Grace me with your company love, if only for a little while for I long to see your face, feel your lips...

James stopped reading at this point and gave his friend an odd look.

"Err...I don't fancy you, Sirius. This is nice and everything but-" he stammered deeply confused, an uncharacteristic reddish tinge colouring his face.

Sirius snorted and punched him hard on the arm. "Yeah, you wish. It's to give to Snape. Remus said you were to date him right. Here's the invitation."

Realization dawned and James cringed. "You're not being serious?" He read through the letter again and made an ugly face. "And is all this...god, is this poetry? Sirius it's disgusting! Where did you find this?"

"Wormtail came up with it actually. He's quite the romantic-

"Your late boys!"

"Shit," muttered James, stowing the note in his pocket out of sight. "Come on."

They jogged the rest of the way to where Professor stood in the doorway to the potions classroom, eyeing them with disapproval. "In you come quickly, we're making a love potion. Get your ingredients and get started."

"How appropriate," Sirius sniggered. "A love potion."

James pushed past him though he too couldn't help but grin. Appropriate indeed.

"Why didn't we think of this before?" James hissed to Sirius as they took their places by an irritated Remus. "A potion! It's genius!"

"Don't even think about it..." muttered Remus from beside them, passing over the remainder of his ingredients so that they could begin their work.

"What do you mean?" Sirius frowned. "Surely if we just..."

Remus shook his head and gave his friends a slightly patronizing look. "If it were that easy, do you not think we would have succeeded already? No...the vow is resistant to potions and any sort of magical spell. The love has to be pure, unaided by any sort of artificial interference."

James sighed and leant back in his chair, letting his eyes drift round the room in a lazy fashion, in

no hurry to begin his work. Two obsidian pools of black quickly caught his attention.

Severus was staring at him.

James grinned to himself as the Slytherin blushed deeply at being caught and quickly turned round and fumbled with his ingredients. A box of lacewings slipped through his sweaty fingers and cluttered to the floor. Severus blushed ever brighter, muttering his barely coherent apologies to the Slytherin girls he'd sprayed with the bugs.

He stumbled forward to clean up the mess but lost his balance on the slippery surface, promptly landing on the floor in a crumpled heap to the delight of the entire potions class. James struggled to keep himself from roaring with laughter, Sirius however had no such restraint.

"Have a nice trip Snivelly?" he jeered, unable to restrain himself. The class laughed louder.

Only Lily stepped forward to help Severus to his feet and even her he brushed off.

James was surprised when it was in his direction that Severus looked in his desperation, something like a plea for help in his eyes. The smirk was quickly wiped off James's face at such a helpless look but it was too late; Severus had seen him laugh.

His whole body seemed to sag in defeat and he stormed from the classroom.

"Aw...Poor Snivelly," called Sirius, his own eyes watering from laughing so hard. "Going back to hide in the dungeons are we? Don't trip!"

James feeling a sudden unexpected surge of annoyance with his friend snapped, "Give it a rest, Sirius."

His friend looked down at him in shock. "What?"

James didn't stop to answer or analyze his feelings, but muttered something else about the plan, and hurried out after Severus once Slughorn had called order, and the rest of the class had turned back to their work.

It didn't take James long to find the cowering boy. He'd wedged himself behind one of the statues on the third floor, wiping furiously at his red eyes.

James, though far from feeling guilty at any pleasure he'd got from Severus embarrassment, couldn't help but sympathize with the boy. It must be something to do with that kiss, he thought as he crouched down beside him.

"You alright?"

Severus looked quickly up, eyes widening at the sight of James, who couldn't help but wince at the utter state that was Severus Snape.

Severus didn't miss the expression and pushed past James. He was embarrassed enough already, he couldn't handle any further torment.

"Hey..." James said quickly as Severus marched past him without a word. "I just wanted to see whether you're ok!"

He grabbed Severus's arm before he could disappear but it was snatched back.

"Think It's funny don't you Potter?" he hissed blood shot eyes narrowing. "I'm just a joke to you

aren't I? ... Just some mindless idiot for you to play your pathetic pranks."

"Snape, I-"

"Save it, Potter," he snapped. He'd had enough. He couldn't do this anymore. How could he get James to fall for him when the unhappiness he brought him was so overbearing? "I don't care anymore. I don't wanna play your stupid games-"

He was cut off mid sentence as James once again grabbed his arm and spun him around, his mouth landing right on the others, lips soft and demanding.

Severus struggled momentarily but succumbed to James's kiss like he knew he would. The Gryffindor pulled away much too soon for his liking, panting slightly, an unreadable look on his face.

James rested his forehead against the smaller boy's with a sigh, keeping a hand on his waist.

"You can't expect me to forgive you just like that, Potter," Snape said attempting to save some of his dignity.

James just grinned, surprised more than Severus by his own actions. "You couldn't resist me, Severus if you tried."

James's, obvious arrogance, so distasteful to Severus in the past, had such a different affect when the Potter charm was turned on him. He felt his insides melt as James's mesmerizing gaze held his own, and was disgusted at his own weakness.

"Are you ok?" James asked again, softer this time. He pulled back to look closely at the Slytherin and tried to see past the blotchy pale skin and swollen, embittered eyes. He shouldn't have kissed him again, he knew it but it was all he could think to do in order to console him.

Severus gave a small short bitter laugh and put a little more distance between him and the distraction that was James. "No, Potter I am not alright. You and your damn friends are fools-"

James couldn't help but smile. It was true after all. "I know, I'm sorry."

Severus raised an eyebrow and James could tell he didn't believe him. He couldn't really blame him.

There was only one way to sort this and James knew how. Taking a deep breath he pushed his hand into his pocket and pulled out the now crumpled piece of parchment Sirius had given him earlier.

"Let me make it up to you," he urged. "I was gonna give you this but..." he gave a short laugh and stowed the romantic nonsense back in his pocket. "I suppose it doesn't matter now."

"What are you talking about, Potter?" Severus asked impatiently, eyeing the paper curiously.

"Come on a date with me?" he asked, eyeing Severus apprehensively through long eyelashes. "This Hogsmeade weekend...Just you and me. No Sirius, no Remus...no anybody. Just the two of us."

Severus's eyes widened. "A date?" he whispered, the word sounding foreign on his tongue. Never before had he gone on a date...and never had he ever considered on going on one with James Potter. What devilish plan did the boy have going on in that abnormally large head of his?

James crossed his arms watching with amusement Severus fight over his emotions and waiting

patiently for an answer.

"But you can't stand me," Severus whispered finally.

"Of course I don't. I've been trying to convince you. I want to know you," James said deflecting the statement as he'd nothing to back up his lies with this time. "Or at least give me time to explain...let us talk without any interference. You can leave any time you want. You call the shots on this one ok? No pressure."

"Ok, then," Severus answered slowly.

If things didn't work...If it was some game James was playing, then things would undoubtedly go back to the way they were before and he'd wake up every morning wishing he were dead. Things for Severus could hardly get much worse, whatever the outcome. His only hope was that it may get a whole lot better with the eradication of James and his entire reputation.

James, whose life was literally in a much more compromising position, beamed, surprised at how easy that had been. "Excellent! Meet you at the main entrance tomorrow morning? 8:00 am? Then we should miss the crowds..."

Severus nodded, nerves already clouding vision.

"Thank you," James said, allowing more relief into his voice than he meant to but Severus didn't seem to notice. He had his hands balled up in the bottom of his robes and his face was still wet.

James grimaced slightly before summoning a tissue and wiping Severus's eyes with it. Snape watched him warily. His whole posture was rigid, making James only too aware of his extreme discomfort. He sighed and dropped his hand. This was going to be harder than he ever could have imagined. The guy was an emotional reject.

"You ready to go back to class?" he asked gently.

Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

James watched frustrated, a sudden unexplained, irrational urge swelling inside of him to shake the boy into finding some courage. Self-pity was not an emotion he was used to dealing with, and he was finding it increasingly frustrating.

"Do I need to bring anything?" Severus asked uncertainly as they made their way slowly back to the classroom, "on this...err on the..."

"On our date," James finished for him with a small smile. "No, nothing," he answered as Severus scowled to himself, glowing crimson. "Just yourself, Severus."

James prised the classroom door open with his foot and pointed Severus inside. It was to his luck that the class were too busy to notice their return. With a final nudge against the small of Severus's back, he retook his place beside Sirius, a fresh headache brewing at his temples.

## Chapter 6

James eyed his reflection in the full length mirror with appreciation. His appearance was not something he could criticise himself on, much to his immense satisfaction.

He turned slowly, eyeing his tanned, flawless skin that covered a lean, lightly muscled torso, pausing to examine his wild, jet black hair that gave him that just out of bed look girls went so crazy for. He met his own hazel eyes last and smiled. It was these eyes that could project any false emotion he pleased, given a little practice. All in all, James Potter was a mighty fine specimen to behold, and he knew it.

The only problem, in regard to fulfilling the bet, was that he had absolutely no idea what would specifically appeal to Snape. He was sure the boy wouldn't be at all disagreeable to his physical appearance, even if he hadn't already shown his preferences for the handsome Gryffindor, but what if there was something... some small blemish to improve on?

James tipped his head from side to side, inspecting the crevasses of his face with a critical eye. Should he cut his hair a little? Temporarily of course... or maybe Snape would prefer it if he were paler, or perhaps a little taller...

Sirius, sprawled out on his bed and watching lazily, let out a low chuckle.

"Do you really think you need to perfect yourself for someone like Snape?" he asked incredulously, clearly amused. "Encase you haven't noticed, he looks like a baboons backside. You're well overmatched as it is."

"What difference does that make?" James replied absently, pulling a few flat strands of his hair to attention.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "It makes every difference. You haven't got to set a standard this time, Prongs. He's not one of your girlfriends." Using James' distraction to his advantage, Sirius snatched the brush that hang loosely in his hand, and throw it across the room.

"So," he continued in a louder voice, swatting James' hands away as he lunged towards to reclaim it, "you don't need to look like bloody prince charming. Snivellus is an ugly scumbag, and therefore, he's got no right to expect anything of you or your appearance. Besides, he already fancies you."

When James continued to appear anxious, Sirius frowned in confusion and asked, "why does it matter to you so much anyway?"

James sighed and turned away from his reflection. He sat on the bed beside Sirius, pulling irritably at his tight trousers. "Not sure. I just need to keep the upper hand in this...whatever this is. I'm not used to dating people... like him. It's just unnatural."

Sirius nodded, grimacing. "I know what you mean."

"He needs to remember exactly who he's going out with," James continued, trying to explain the turmoil he was under. His pride was suffering severely and needed reassurance.

But he also knew the reminder of their social standing was for another reason. Having to convince himself that he was so much better than Snape, in order to make what they were doing more feel more justifiable, was a type of reasoning he'd never thought he'd be forced to deal with, but now he

couldn't help thinking that things had finally gone too far.

Bullying was one thing, but this level of manipulation was far more uncomfortable. He did not try to explain this to Sirius, who was now sitting up and stretching his long legs out in front of him leisurely, apparently content that his point had been made.

"I feel like an idiot," James grumbled instead, tugging at his collar. His voice held such misery that Sirius paused in his yawning and threw him a sympathetic look.

A beam of light fell across the room and they both turned towards the window where the morning sunlight was beginning to filter in more predominantly. James' resentment grew.

"I'm going on a date with Snape for god's sake, and it's a Saturday," he wailed, suddenly struck by the sacrifice he was making. "Could anything be sadder? We could be playing quidditch...looking at girls...hanging out...Why did we do this-?"

Sirius cut him off, a more serious expression adorning his features for a moment. "None of us think you're enjoying this. We're right behind you," he said firmly. "This bet is way more important than girls, James."

James raised his eyebrows in disbelief. That was something he'd never thought Sirius would say.

"Just until this is over," Sirius grinned as he read James's expression, "but come on, Padfoot, remember why we made this bet in the first place. Seeing Snape's face when he finds out what you've done to him...It will all be worth it."

James nodded and turned back to the mirror, a similar smirk creasing his own features, though it failed to reach his eyes. He felt uncertain as a strange weight settled in his stomach, and asked himself why he didn't feel better about this. This was a game, right? It was supposed to be fun, even despite the danger he was in.

Then why didn't it feel that way?

James growled in frustration, dragging his robe over his head and padding across to his wardrobe. He was James Potter. It would be the greatest prank they'd ever achieved. He'd dated pretty much every good looking girl in the year. He could pull this off. He was going to win this bet and damn well laugh his arse off when he'd done it.

"What are you doing?" Sirius asked, confused at James's sudden determination.

"If I'm going to do this," James said pulling a crisp white shirt and tie, followed by an even tighter black pair of trousers. It did not take much effort to repress his conscience. "I'm going to do it properly."

He'd treat Snape just like he would if he wanted to take him on a date. He would imagine, to the best of his ability, that he was one of his many girlfriends and he was simply taking them down to the village to entertain them for the day. He could do this and he would make it work, or his name wasn't James Potter.

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Severus eyed his reflection in the mirror with something close to panic. He was hideous, there was no denying it. His lank greasy black hair curtained his shallow cheeks, lifeless and filthy to the touch. His skin was an unhealthy colour and even more so in his nervous state.

His teeth were crooked and split unevenly between yellow and black. His face was constantly contorted into a sour expression...his eyes cold and evasive.

No matter how he tried to rearrange these features, they fell back into their familiar routine, displaying the Slytherin's constant misery. He was thin...far too thin, too pale, too awkward, and in no way good enough for James Potter, with whom he had a date in one hour exactly.

A strangled sound ripped its way from Severus's scratchy throat, as he stumbled towards the toilet. He retched and heaved until he collapsed, weakened to a crumpled heap, huddled in the corner of the bathroom, unable to move to the shaking that wracked through his entire body.

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"What time did Remus say he was getting back?" James asked, carefully pulling his tie into place.

"Anytime now," Sirius answered with a glance at his watch. "He shouldn't be too long. He said he only had to pick up a few bits."

"Merlin knows what that werewolf's come up with this time..." James muttered but next second Remus had entered the dormitory, followed closely by Peter who was holding something that looked suspiciously like flowers.

"What is that?" James asked hesitantly.

"This," said Remus brightly, following James's accusing finger, "is a bouquet. It was chosen especially to match the individual. I asked the florist what they suggested for a Slytherin who was...rather shy, potentially deceptive, interested in the Dark Arts and gifted with the art of Potion making-"

"Remus, am I dating this guy or are you?" James cut him off, torn between amusement and irritation.

"Sorry," Remus muttered, having the grace to look just a little awkward, "...but well...he came up with this and it is...I think...extremely appropriate for your date today."

James sighed at the hopeful expression on his friend's face and reached out to take the flowers. He admired them critically and had to admit, they did have a unique charm. Black and a deep, velvety green dominated the arrangement, with a variety of plants each emitting a unique, entrancing smell. James could identify cinnamon and something that smelt similar to pine...

"So, what do you think? Do you reckon he'll like it?" Remus asked anxiously, watching James's face closely for a reaction. "The man at the florist did seem to know what he was doing and you can't not take flowers on a date, James. When have you ever forgotten before?"

James made a face, still eyeing the flowers cautiously. "Sorry, Remus, I understand and I am grateful...I just can't get my head around this whole date with Snape thing..."

Peter shuddered and slumped down into a chair beside him.

"So, Prongs, what do you think?" Sirius asked with a bewildered look at Remus, caught off guard once again by how feminine, albeit thoughtful, he could be sometimes.

"I like them," James said finally, taking another deep sniff, entranced by the mesmerizing smell. They did, in a strange way, remind him of Snape, though it was weird. He liked the smell, it was intoxicating, yet he hated Snape. As the two were directly connected, this made no sense.

whatsoever.

James shook his head and set down the flowers, refusing to be drawn in by the thought.

"Remus..." he began, feeling slightly guilty for not having thought of this himself. "I would have done this...eventually...probably...You didn't have to-"

"Of course I did," Remus cut in dismissively. "You need all the help you can get. Severus Snape is not going to be an easy catch. We're here for you James," he added in a softer tone. "I know you usually like to keep your...romantic," they all winced at the word, "relationships private, but we're here and we'll help you every step of the way this time."

"Bravo," Sirius clapped his hands together twice at Remus' sentiments, amused at his softness, but James took it to heart and gave him a warm smile.

"Thanks, Remus. Now there's just one more thing I have to do..." he said, taking a deep breath and eyeing himself in the mirror once more. "How long do I have?"

"20 minutes," Remus informed him, "but hurry, James. If you're late, I don't reckon he'll hang around."

James nodded quickly and shrunk the flowers, before stuffing his invisibility cloak in his pocket and heading towards the library, head down, keeping up a fast pace in order to avoid curious glances and unwanted conversation.

It did not take him long to reach his destination. He sidestepped into the library, wary even now of being seen in such a place, especially dressed so formally. He'd just have to pass it off as meeting a girl from the village if anyone asked him-

"Potter!"

James had found Lily exactly where he'd expected, an untidy array of books spread out on the desk in front of her.

She eyed him up and down as he approached. James kept carefully still as she took in his appearance, each part of his body heating as her curious gaze passed over it. He noticed with glee that she was flushed, ever so slightly, as her eyes reached his face.

He raised an eyebrow and grinned, but this seemed to bring her back to earth. She looked away, as though irritated with herself. "You look smart," she said curtly, turning back to her work and asking without looking back up, "What are you doing in here?"

"Good morning to you too," James smirked, sliding into the seat beside her, careful not to crease his jacket. "I need your help."

"My help?" Her eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. "Why would you need-"

"Because you're the only one who can," he answered simply.

"Potter," Lily sighed, "for the last time, I do not want to go out with you-"

"That's not what this is about!" James stopped her before she could go off on one. "Just hear me out. Please?"

Lily's lips tightened but she set down her pen and leaned back, fixing him with a curious, but

impatient gaze.

James took this as consent and took a deep breath, aware that he was about to take a dangerous risk.

"I need you to tell me about Severus Snape," he said quietly, though there was no need, the library was empty at this early hour, except for the two of them. "I need to know his likes, dislikes...what he appreciates, what he doesn't...I need to know what offends him and what...if anything, makes him happy. I need to know everything about him...as much as you can tell me."

Lily's almond shaped eyes narrowed, as James had expected, with suspicion.

"I don't want to hurt him," James lied hurriedly before she could speak. He gave her a small smile, fixing his face into an innocent expression. "I just want to get to know him better and change my ways. I promised you I wouldn't ruin his happiness the other day, right? Well, give me a reason to. Tell me who this boy is that you're so fond of-"

"You don't expect me to honestly believe that do you?" she snapped, looking at James as though seeing him again for the first time. "God, how low can you sink? You think I'd give you extra ammunition to hurt him further? You really are foul, Potter."

James sighed, getting slowly to his feet. He'd known this had been a long shot, but he'd had to try. It was too bad Severus had no other friends he could interrogate. This was going to be difficult as it was today; he needed all the help he could get to win the Slytherin. He couldn't risk not knowing all the little things about him, so that he didn't offend. He'd had too many setbacks to screw things up with any more silly mistakes, but it seemed as though he'd have to go without Lily's help.

"I'm sorry for wasting your time then, Evans," he spoke quietly. "I just thought you, of all people, would have had faith in me...in people...and their ability to change. I guess I was wrong."

He walked out of the library, disappointed and irritated, but a hesitant voice called him back.

"Potter, wait."

A knowing smirk spread its way across James's face, but he quickly smothered it before turning back and propping an eyebrow in questioning.

"Yes?" he asked politely.

A mixture of emotions passed across Lily's face, and he watched them with interest. She stood up slowly, cautiously, and moved round her desk to stand in front of him.

"Why do you not ask Severus all this yourself?" she asked finally. "If you really want to change that is."

"Oh, I intend to," James answered with a small private smile, though she wouldn't know how true this was until it was too late. "But I just thought I'd get some background knowledge first...so that I don't offend him or anything and you know...show him how important this is to me."

"I don't honestly think he'd be interested in befriending you, Potter," she said seriously.

"I don't want to be friends with him. Not exactly..." James answered, pushing his hands into his pockets, enjoying the play of this conversation immensely.

Lily still looked sceptical. James was forced to push her a little, very conscious of how little time

they had.

"Come on, Evans," he begged. "Just tell me the basics... Anything."

"Ok," she agreed eventually, as though it was against her better judgement, "but if a word of this gets out to your friends...if you tease him about anything, I tell you I'll hex you into oblivion, James Potter!"

"I won't say a word," James promised, fingers crossed firmly behind his back.

"Alright..." Lily said, leading him back to the table, "but I'm not joking, Potter. You'll wish you'd never been born if you hurt him with this."

"I've been on the receiving end of your hexes before, Evans," he said, sliding back into the seat beside her. "I won't hurt him."

"Well I can't exactly make you take the Unbreakable Vow," she said absently as she cleared the table of books, "as much as I'd like to.."

James's eyes widened and he laughed with her, having no doubt that she'd loath him, even more than she did now, when this was all over, and she became aware of his true intentions. He almost felt guilty in involving her, as she'd never forgive herself for playing a part in Severus's suffering, whether she was knowingly doing it or not.

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Severus could hear, as though from far away, a voice calling his name. He jerked his head up, from where it lay on the cold stone marble of his bathroom floor, and he listened intently.

"Severus," the voice called again, timidly, as though they weren't sure he was even there.

Severus wouldn't have bothered answering had he not been so curious as to how they got in... It certainly wasn't one of the boys that shared his dormitory.

"Lily?"

He heard, rather than saw, the bathroom door open. He didn't bother trying to make himself presentable but instantly regretted it as Lily's hand flew to her face, and she gave a small, sympathetic gasp.

"How the hell did you get in the boys dormitories?" Severus demanded, heaving himself into a sitting position.

Lily shook her head, speechless. She couldn't help it. He looked awful.

He took badly to her reaction and slammed shut the bathroom door, before she could say a word. Lily silently berated herself for acting so immaturely and knocked softly on the door. Her immediate suspicions flew to James Potter for getting Severus in this state, but she'd only just come from speaking with him, so it couldn't have been him.

Still, she was worried that she may have said too much to the Gryffindor. He'd looked far too pleased with himself as he left the library, hence the reason she was here with Severus now, to give him a warning.

It must have been her who'd upset Severus: the new mystery woman.

"Severus, please," she begged, "talk to me. I want to help you...Just tell me what's happened."

It took a great stretch of her patience, but eventually, with much coaxing, the door swung open and a miserable Severus gazed at her through puffy red eyes.

Lily carefully schooled her features into that of calm, obliterating her previous horror, and knelt down beside him.

"What is it?" she asked softly. "Is it her? Your girlfriend? Has something happened-?"

"She's not my girlfriend," Severus snapped, hating himself for this show of weakness and allowing Lily to witness it. "Not yet."

"Not yet?" she prodded. Then she took in the obvious attempt Severus had made to tidy himself up. The smart robes he was wearing, she'd never seen before, and if she wasn't mistaken, there was a broken comb tangled in his hair.

"Are you going on a date, Severus?" she asked quietly.

He scowled at her sideways.

"...I thought I could...I didn't think I'd get like..." he stammered, not knowing what he was trying to say, but somehow needing to portray his failure. "I'm sorry, Lily. I don't know what I was thinking."

Lily reached out a hand and gently lifted his chin. "Severus," she whispered, voice full of compassion. This was the very thing she'd been dreading. She knew such a good thing couldn't last for too long without its hiccups. She just hoped it wasn't anything more serious. "You're worth more than this. Don't let other people-"

Severus pushed her roughly away and got awkwardly to his feet, facing the mirror once again. His eyes hardened as they retook in his appearance. He wondered how the mirror had not yet cracked under the hideousness of his features.

His appearance had never bothered him to this extent before. Not before James Potter took an interest. Now he had a reason to pay himself a little more attention and quickly summarised that there was little to do, short of muggle plastic surgery, that could change the repulsion anyone would feel on sight of him. It didn't matter his dedication or his motivation to his plan. Lily's shampoo would only carry him so far.

His cause was hopeless. He and James were too ill-matched.

"Tell me what's wrong," Lily repeated gently, disturbed beyond measure by the vulgar glint in Severus's eye as he studied his own face. This self-repulsion was difficult to witness and she felt the strong urge to leave but her strong ties, her friendship to Severus and the knowledge that, at the moment he had no one else to help him but her, forced her to stay and get him through this.

"I was a fool," Severus muttered, more to himself than anyone else. "Who am I a worthy partner to anyone? Especially someone like...I can't...I don't know how to be...how to act...I never should have started this-"

"Yes, you should," Lily interrupted firmly, forcing him to look at her. She realised now that nothing had gone wrong, not in the formal sense. Severus was giving up, succumbing to his nerves. "You should, Severus, no matter how it turns out. You've done what's right...you've followed your heart-"

"I'm not a damn Gryffindor, Lily," he snapped, turning away from her. "I do not care for my heart."

Lily shook her head in firm disagreement. "Of course you do, Sev. You wouldn't feel for this person unless it was important to you."

Severus took a deep sigh and looked at her, on the verge of telling her everything, all the unpleasant details but knew at once, that he could never do it. She would detest him for his lies and his revenge, and he knew that he could not live without her. She was his only anchor.

Yet he also knew that if he was forced to choose, his anger and bitterness towards James would claim more of him than anything he'd ever felt for Lily.

"What do I do?" he asked, almost pleading for her to give him an answer...for everything, for his life and everything this revenge ploy represented. She could only stare at him helplessly and he knew that he was alone.

He began abruptly pulling at his shirt, ripping it from his chest, but a hand distilled his movements barely after he'd begun them.

"No," Lily said, more conviction in her eyes than before and an anger Severus couldn't quite place. "You are not giving up," she said with determination. She knew this was about more than just a date. Severus was giving up on everything...caving in. It only made her resolve stronger. This new attachment he was making would succeed. It had to. It was just the chance he needed to get his life on track.

Severus snorted. She was not going to stop him.

He moved his hands to his shoes, to cast them off also, but she grabbed his wrists. "Severus...I can help you. You can do this."

He made the mistake of looking into her eyes, and all the resolve and fire in them eyes mirrored that of what he'd felt just a week ago, when he'd devised his plan.

But no plan was without its flaws and his was riddled with them.

"It is hopeless," he explained to her slowly, as if she were a child. "It does not take a genius to work out that those such as I are meant to be alone. I cannot fight fate-"

"Oh stop being so melodramatic, Severus and come with me," Lily cried in exasperation, pulling on his wrists until he gave in and followed her. There was only so much of his pessimistic attitude that she would allow. She sat him on the bed and mended the shirt, smoothing out the creases.

"Take a deep breath Sev," she begged, "go and if it doesn't work out, you can come back. I'll be waiting and we can sort this out."

"But-"

"Hang on," she interrupted him, giving him a stern look. "Just listen."

He gave her a withering look and leaned back, fixing her with a glare.

"Ok..." she continued, ignoring his disinterest, "this girl," she missed Severus's cringe, "she obviously likes you...for all your faults...so I don't know why you lack confidence."

"It is just a mirror, Sev," she added in a softer voice when he averted his eyes. "It shows you what

you look like not who you are. That's what's important. There is nothing wrong with you. Not every relationship works out but we have to try. It's what keeps the world spinning. You can be happy Severus...you have the chance. Take it."

"Is that why you choose to be alone?" Severus snapped unkindly. He so desperately wanted to indulge in her words of comfort and do exactly as she asked, but nothing in his life had gone right so far, and he saw no reason for it to change now.

"I don't know if it's worth it," he said quietly, "it's confusing-"

"Of course it is," Lily said, glad that he was at least listening, "but where would the fun be without that?"

Severus scowled at his feet, but he could feel his body beginning to relax.

"Shall I get you ready?" Lily asked softly, watching him carefully with a hopeful expression.

Severus's lips twitched and he nodded. He had nothing left but Lily. He would not do this for her but he couldn't, and wouldn't, do it without her.

He made to stand up but she pushed him back down with impatience, a smile on her face, already sprinting around his room, grabbing for combs and aftershave and preparing him for the impending date that could make or break everything.

James raked the entrance Hall with his eyes from the top of the grand staircase. Eventually they settled on the raven haired boy, standing awkwardly at the foot of the stairwell. A smirk creased his face as he descended the stairs towards him.

So, he had come. He straitened his tie and ran his hair over his gelled hair, smoothing it to perfection, all the while growing closer to the boy who'd yet to notice him.

James paused for a moment, just a few steps from the bottom, and watched with amusement as Severus shifted from foot to foot impatiently and constantly looked at his watch.

"Severus," James said loudly and Severus jumped in surprise.

James gave him a handsome smile and watched Severus take in his appearance, just as he had with Lily, but this time with a greater amount of anticipation.

Severus's lips parted and his eyes followed the length of James's body, pausing for a moment where the fabric clung to the subtle curves, complimenting perfectly his lean frame. His unruly hair had been plastered to his head, transforming it to sleek and shiny. Somehow it made him look older and, though it was different, Severus found that he liked it just as much as he did his normal style.

Unconsciously, he ran the tip over his tongue over his lip at the delicious sight he was presented with.

"Potter," he returned finally, when he realised he was being watched, and blushed a deep scarlet.

James smirked, a deep unfathomable look in his eyes that curled Severus's toes. "You look good," he commented lightly, allowing his own hazel eyes to sweep across his date, taking in his fair attempt at smartening himself up.

James motioned for Severus to follow him, reaching for his invisibility cloak as he did so. The

bright lights of outside beckoned to them and James held the oak front doors of the castle open and Severus shuffled through, head down.

## Chapter 7

James glanced sideways at Severus with narrowed eyes, as he tugged his invisibility cloak from the confines of his pocket and let it hang loose at his side. Severus' own gaze was strictly focused on the ground, giving James the opportunity to assess him properly as they walked, without having to worry about concealing his expression.

The Slytherin had obviously made a serious effort to brush up on his appearance, even if his fashion sense was lacking. Raising curious eyes over slim, black clad hips and narrow shoulders, James' intrigue grew. With a small, indistinguishable hum of approval he paused to observe the clean lines of Severus' face.

He expected to see the usual thick layer of grease, coating the limp hair that clung grossly to the boy's pale cheeks. Surprisingly, this too was clean, if not reaching the semi-professional standard that James had come to expect from previous dates. It smelt faintly of apples and appeared to have acquired a new leash of life.

The clothes Severus had adorned were not wholly displeasing, though predictable; the smooth black material clung tightly to his body, fitted to compliment his slight frame, which, now uncovered from multiple layers, was even slighter than James would've imagined.

The awkwardness Severus felt in wearing such formal attire was made only too apparent in the way he tugged at his sleeves, and frequently itched at his collar. However, this did nothing to deter the final effect, which was unexpectedly pleasing.

No longer utterly despairable, James would give the boy an O for effort.

Severus begun to drift behind as they crossed the courtyard, but James could not bring himself to keep pace with him. If anyone was to glance out of the windows, and witness them together, he daren't consider the repercussions.

When the unmistakable sign of a student gathering grew larger in the distance, James was forced to slow his pace and raise his cloak in preparation. He gave Severus a tight smile.

Awkwardness would be an overriding factor James would be forced to compete with throughout the day. They both felt it prominently. They could not even walk, side by side, in a civil fashion, without sensing ulterior motives were at work, with suspicion and doubt at their highest.

"Nice day," James commented, motioning towards the pale blue sky in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

Severus inclined his head in agreement, predictably flushing at the statement as though James had asked him to drop his trousers.

Sighing through his teeth, James turned his face into the warmth of the sun and took in the familiar sight of three large hoops, just visible from the quidditch pitch. Aching resentment caused his heart to sink, as he took in the reality of his current situation. Another weekend lost.

Inhaling deeply, he closed his eyes against the pleasant aroma of freshly cut grass and considered a series of more preferable options of spending a sunny Saturday.

James considered forcing proper conversation, but suffered a lack of motivation. Severus looked lost in a world of his own, and James did not yet wish to pull him out of it. With a sly smirk, he

considered reaching out a grabbing the shorter boy's hand, purely for his own amusement, but he held himself back. He had to be very carefull about how he behaved today. He couldn't push Severus too far, too fast.

When they reached the shelter of the forbidden forest, James slung the cloak over them both, ensuring their continued privacy. Severus seemed to appreciate the gesture and relaxed more into the rhythm of their walking.

"Where are we going?" Severus asked finally in a small, apprehensive voice. He was rapidly becoming aware of how very far out they were, and alone, as Hogwarts shrunk back into the distance.

"Hogsmeade," James answered shortly, quickening their pace as they passed an excitable group of fifth years. One snag on the cloak and they'd be revealed.

"Right. Of course."

James could sense Severus' hesitation and struggled to smile convincingly, to ease his anxiety and soften the snappiness of his response. "The other side of Hogsmeade," he corrected himself, "no one ever goes there. We won't be recognised."

Severus nodded and concentrated on remaining hidden under the cloak, which presented difficult when it required him to be in such close proximity with James. He could smell the other boy's aftershave and it was burning at his nostrils.

It took much longer to reach the gates than either would have liked, and even longer as they strode in uncomfortable silence along the hobbled streets of Hogsmeade, in search of somewhere quiet to converse.

Normally, James would have reserved a table, but this was hardly a conventional date. Students rarely went this far into the village and without a plan of action, James was clueless as to which restaurant to recommend.

They finally came across a small café on the outskirts of the village, attractive due to its obvious emptiness. James couldn't make out the name on the sign, for the paint had peeled excessively, but it appeared quiet and calm, which was all they required. Anything else would have been too intimidating.

But he hesitated, remembering the way in which they were both dressed. This was a date, not merely a friendly afternoon chat.

He turned abruptly away from the building before he could be drawn in by its open atmosphere and reassuring tackiness, onto the other side of the road, and Severus silently followed.

A second restaurant caught his eye, and it was certainly that of the romantic kind. It didn't seem the most inviting place in the world, with its gloomy appearance and dark, oppressive walls, but there was a candle lit on each single table and it would accommodate for their dress. It would have to do.

James glanced around, but nobody else had come down this far. He deemed it safe to pull of the cloak.

"This one look alright?" he asked Severus, nodding towards the restaurant as he folded the cloak carefully back into his pocket.

He received a short, jerky nod in reply. Severus didn't appear as though he could have managed a

more coherent response; he looked almost sick. But this was not unusual and James didn't comment on it.

Instead, he tilted his head towards the door with a smile, forcing enthusiasm.

"Come on then."

James ducked his head under the bowing of the woodwork, took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

Severus groaned quietly as they stood side by side in the entrance and observed their setting. Instantly, James knew why. If he'd intended to select a venue that would reduce the pressure of their situation, he had failed. The place really wasn't so shabby. In fact, it was quite nice. Very smart. James made a mental note to use this accommodation for future dates. He knew many girls who would love it.

The expensive decor had James rummaging in his pockets, unsure that his limited funds were likely to cover the heavy costs that the deep red velvet curtains, littered with love hearts, and the polished oak wood furniture implied.

He considered, for a short moment, turning back and finding somewhere else, but a friendly waiter was already beckoning them over, and Severus was looking at him expectantly, stiff with nerves. James smiled reassuringly and took Severus' hand in his own, giving the Slytherin the courage required to walk on forwards.

The girl who greeted them was friendly enough, however, and he returned her smile warmly as she led them to a table. James did not miss the curious glance at their joined hands, but looked away before she could catch his eye, refusing to make a mockery of Severus today.

He kept a firm grip on Severus' hand, despite the overwhelming urge to drop it. It's not real, he told himself. No one's looking, except the waiter, and you'll never see her again after today. It doesn't matter what she thinks.

But James found himself hard to convince. He'd dedicated years to his reputation and didn't like to look a fool, which was exactly what felt like here with Severus.

Clearing his throat, a bead of sweat trailing down the back of his neck, James pulled out a chair for Severus and they both sat. Thankfully, there were only a few other customers and none of them looked particularly interested in a pair of awkward teenage boys.

"What can I get you two then?" the waiter asked in a pleasant voice, open curiosity behind her smile as she discreetly examined them, taking in their nervous glances and formal dress. It couldn't have been more obvious what they were doing there.

Stretching backwards and smiling calmly across the table, James ordered them a couple of soft drinks, the cheapest on the menu, of which Severus had not even glanced. When the waiter had finally sauntered off, notebook in hand, James returned his full attention to Severus.

As predicted, the Slytherin was looking extremely uncertain, perched on the edge of his chair and watching James intently, as though for further instruction.

"So..." James took a deep breath and leaned forwards with a great effort, intending to engage his date in intelligent, life saving conversation. "We're here! Are we going to talk now?"

Severus looked up slowly and made a half-hearted gesture between a nod and a shrug.

James sighed under his breath, mildly disappointed at the lack of enthusiasm and willing co-operation in Severus' response. The boy had agreed to come, hadn't he? A part of him must want to be here.

James covertly checked his watch and felt his heart sink. They'd been out just twenty minutes. Reluctantly, he turned back to Severus.

"What's the matter?" he asked gently. "Do you not want to be here, Severus, because if you don't, we coul-"

"No, I do," Severus spoke urgently. "I really do. I'm sorry. I just..."

His gaze kept flickering from James' face to the candle steadily burning between them, fighting to retain his composure. He was not a romantic. He was cynical and unsympathetic. All of this had no meaning to him.

Unknowingly making Severus' current inner conflict worse, James drew the bunch of flowers from his pocket. He deliberately knocked their ankles together as he presented the bouquet, leaving his foot resting lightly against Severus'.

"Do you like them?" James asked, hiding a smile as Severus' eyes widened, his mouth falling slack. It was quite endearing really. He'd obviously been the first person ever to buy the Slytherin flowers.

Severus lowered his face and sniffed briefly at the petals, his nose crinkling as they itched his face. "I... Yes. Thank you," he muttered, surprisingly enjoying the rare emotion derived from being flattered, even through his bewilderment. "I did not expect... I have not myself brought you anything," he explained uncomfortably. "If you wish it, I could-"

"Don't be stupid," James waved a hand, wishing that he'd brought a camera in order to capture the exact expression on Severus' flushed face, the bouquet held stiffly in his lap.

The waiter chose that moment to re-appear. Her eyes widened on sight of the stunning array of flowers. "Oh, they're pretty," she commented lightly.

"Yes, they are," James replied firmly, eyes on Severus. "Could we have some water? I don't want them to dry up."

"Of course," she agreed, disappearing through a side door.

"Severus," James said quietly, leaning forward, taking a moment to pity the inexperienced boy. "It's ok to be nervous. I'm not expecting... Try to relax. No pressure. We're only here to talk. The flowers are just an indication of my feelings that may, or may not, come into question today. I'll leave it up to you, ok?"

Severus could only nod, his stomach knotting into a strange twist as he continued his attempt to get his head around what had just happened.

Silence descended upon them once again, tenser than before, and as a temporary distraction, James leaned back and appreciated again, for a selfish moment, just how pleasantly different Severus looked today. He was still an emotional wreck, that hadn't changed, but his physical appearance... That suit really was quite flattering. And the boy had some truly decent cheek bones. If it wasn't for the tense muscles in his face, screwing it up into a constant frown, James may have said Severus looked almost... normal.

It may have been the fact that James was getting to know him slightly better as a person, or at least that he was becoming more familiar, that made him reluctantly acknowledge that Severus wasn't entirely hideous. Ugly, yes, and by no means beautiful, but he was no ogre.

This reassurance did not stop his eyes from betraying him, however. It wasn't until Severus raised a brave eyebrow, as he realised he was being openly stared at, that James finally looked away. He knew Severus felt very exposed here in this setting, and the boy's limited confidence was failing him. He didn't want to make it any harder for him.

James cleared his throat and started again. "So... I wanted to ask-"

"I'll take the flowers." The girl had returned, a large silver vase in hand. Severus, eyeing his gift somewhat possessively, handed the flowers over with reluctance and watched as she set them down carefully. "There you go," she stood back, admiring her work. "I'll just leave them here."

"Thanks," James smiled, nudging the candle to the side so that their drinks could be placed between them.

"As I was saying-" he turned back to Severus, but was cut off once again.

"Was there anything else?" she asked James, clutching her notebook to her chest and eyeing him appreciatively, which didn't go unnoticed by either of them.

A wave of envy caught Severus off guard, as he watched their brief exchange through a curtain of hair. Jealousy was, unfortunately, an emotion he was very intimate with.

With regard to his developing relationship with James, the bitter feeling was only intensified.

James thanked the waitress politely once again, casting a discreetly nervous glance at Severus. She lingered for a moment to give him a very unprofessional smile, forcing him to pay her a little more attention. She really was quite pretty, James acknowledged, as she revealed a set of perfectly white teeth.

There was more than just polite interest behind her service, and he was experienced enough to know just what she was implying. James considered the possibility of perhaps swopping details, for a later date, but Severus presence was unavoidable and he was forced, rather reluctantly, to forget the thought.

However, she continued to loiter unnecessarily and her inability to take a hint began to irritate him. In the pretense of folding him a napkin, she shot a pointedly perplexed look at Severus, which obviously questioned their pairing.

James followed her eyes and wondered, for a moment, whether he'd met her before... It was possible, hence her forwardness. Not that he'd remember her face in particular out of many. If he was searching for recognition, her largely exposed cleavage was more likely to provide clues.

Severus' all too clear discomfort and embarrassment was only too clear, as he followed the silent messages, and James, unexpectedly, felt a sudden possessive protection over the Slytherin. Who was she to judge? He startled himself slightly with this abrupt thought. Who was he to judge? But he fast retreated from this thought, as he seemed to be doing a lot lately. He didn't need to make this complicated.

"Sir?"

"There is nothing else," he said firmly. He turned from her and took one of Severus' hands in his

own. "We are fine. Thank you."

Her eyes widened slightly as she watched their actions, repeated for the second time. Severus blushed, but deeply appreciated the loyalty James was showing him.

She left again. James could sense her disappointment, as he felt it also, but he couldn't give her what she wanted. Not today, anyway. He carefully pulled back his hand, so as not to make Severus any more uncomfortable.

"Sorry," he said quietly, "I just wanted to show her that... you know... I'm with you. I'm not looking for a relationship with anyone else."

Severus nodded, these words causing him to shiver pleasurable. James, his? He entertained the thought of James Potter on his arm, permanently. His possession. His lover. His protection.

However, try as he might, Severus could not envision a realistic scene in which he and James were walking down the streets of Hogsmeade, hand in hand, content with the world's discrimination against their relationship.

Remus was adamant that they needed to find out more about each other, in order to set the foundations for a relationship and get to know each other on a personal level. James went over his friend's checklist of possible conversation starters.

He could discuss family background... James was curious, he had to admit, about where Severus came from, and how he grew up, that sort of thing, but not enough to use it as a starting point. It was too risky; he didn't want to offend. Lily had mentioned vaguely that the boy's home life was uncomfortable..

He could investigate further Severus's likes and dislikes. James would be curious as to whether Severus had any particular hobbies, aside of obsessing over the Dark Arts, though it seemed unlikely.

The number one on Remus' list had been to create a fresh slate. James sighed. This was where they needed to begin. He knew he couldn't exactly ask for forgiveness for his previous treatment of Severus. A more tactful approach would need to be adopted. He didn't think he could demonstrate enough remorse; he needed to find a substantial amount before he'd dare it.

But they needed to place the past firmly behind them, before they could move onto the endless facts that Remus was sure they needed to know about one another.

"Severus, I..." James begun tentatively. "I want to say to you that... our relationship in the past..." He cleared his throat again, all too aware of Severus's sceptical gaze, "I know it hasn't been... favourable... but I'd like to move on... once and for all... And I think you do too. What do you think?" It was a poor excuse for a summary of the level to which he'd bullied Severus, he knew, but it would have to do. It was all his pride could allow.

The candle on the table between them flickered, casting shadows across the Slytherin's face, making it hard to read a reaction. James missed the tightening of his jaw and the further paling of his sallow face.

Severus surprised him, however, with a short, stiff nod. "I feel the same," he said simply. "You are forgiven. I am prepared to forget it, as I would quite like a... relationship with you... If that is what you are suggesting?"

"It is," James answered quickly.

What he couldn't see was Severus's hands clamped at the sides of his chair, chalk white from the intensity of the force in which he was squeezing. Those words had cost him dearly. It had taken all he had, everything he had thrown together over the last few days, in order to prepare himself for such a confrontation.

Rage and bitterness bubbled threateningly below the surface. He wanted nothing more than to lash out and strike that self-satisfied smirk from James' perfect face, but he hid it well behind a mask of calm which would, later in his life, build the walls to the cunning evasion of which he would be infamous.

"Thank you," James said with visible relief, oblivious to Severus' reaction. "I really appreciate that. You have no idea..."

"No problem," Severus replied, fists twitching. How dare James Potter think that he had got away with all that he'd put him through. But he couldn't win James's love with that in between them, as significant as it was. He may be deeply attracted to the teen, but by God did he hate him, now more than ever. It was only the thought of his plan that kept him sane in those next few minutes, as he rode out his anger.

James had ordered a second set of drinks by the time Severus had regained enough sanity to pay proper attention to the very one sided conversation that was going on. He nodded numbly when James offered to refill his glass and drank deeply from its contents, not bothering to ask how the boy knew what his favourite beverage was.

He was quietly building the confidence to take another step. James believed he was forgiven, which was exactly what he needed. He believed the air was cleared so he need not feel guilty, and they were now free to attempt a relationship without the weight of the past.

"So, what's life outside Hogwarts like for you?" James asked lightly, running out of neutral topics. "Do you have family?"

Severus' shoulders tensed and he hesitated before nodding. He would have to be honest and assessable, no matter how James was unknowingly cutting him with these personal questions. James wouldn't love him more for his background, but Severus didn't have the aptitude to sustain a lie in this form and he couldn't afford to be caught attempting to. To skirt around the ugly details would be much easier.

"I have a mother and a father," he confirmed. "They live in London. Spinners End."

"Right," James nodded. "Never been there. What's it like?"

"It is... an acceptable place to reside," Severus answered evasively. "I have not known anywhere different, aside from Hogwarts."

"There's no place like home," James smiled. "I bet you enjoy living in London. You must have loads of stuff you can do..."

"Hardly. There is not much in the way of company and the revolving quality of a dustbin lid fails to remain an entertainment once a certain age has been reached," Severus answered tersely, without thinking. He blinked when he re-counted his own bluntness, only made more bitter by the emptiness in his tone.

"Not to say that I-"

"It's alright," James cut him off, his face falling. This was exactly what he'd been avoiding. "We

don't have to discuss this. If you'd rather-"

"Do you have family, Po... James?" Severus cut across him, flinching slightly but holding an air of determination that suggested he'd not be so easily broken by such a topic. "A home? Brothers and sisters perhaps?"

"No. I'm an only child."

"So am I."

"Really? I kind of wish I did have siblings," James said with a small, wistful sigh, relieved that Severus had so tactfully altered the conversation to safer grounds. He'd finally found something they had in common. Too bad it had to be something neither of them had any say in.

"What are your family like?" Severus asked, having no doubt that the glory filled Gryffindor would have the cosy, love filled home life that was exactly the opposite of his. James did not disappoint.

Severus was feeling quite nauseous by the time James had finished describing his doting mother and strong, able father that he admired so. He swallowed uneasily and felt a fresh lump in his throat at the simple unfairness.

James seemed to be moving through the date as if working on a checklist. Severus quickly became bored with the monotonous of the ordeal.

"I'd like an explanation," Severus said, cutting through James's babbling about potions, to which he was sure he had no particular interest and was discussing for his benefit alone. "Of your intentions. I need to be certain of how you wish to... proceed."

James agreed. He'd been avoiding this, but knew it was inevitable. "I really like you, Severus-"

"And why is that?" Severus asked, without threat, as though he was merely curious. "I like you as well of course. I'd just... like to know why exactly when you've never shown any preference before."

"I've changed," James said, slowly and carefully. It was imperative that Severus should believe this. "I've realised things... My behaviour, in the past, has been unforgivable. I regret it. Deeply. As I've said. I just want to right all the wrong I've ever done by you."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He would not make this easy for the Gryffindor. Not this part.

"I want to get to know you properly as the person you are," James struggled on, building further on his lies. "I have become really attracted to you. It was quite sudden. Girls no longer interest me, or any other male." James had heard this could happen when you fell in love and found your soul mate, as ludicrous as it sounded, but used the theory to his advantage. "You're all I want, I can't really explain why. It's just destiny, I suppose."

Severus eyed him carefully. James did look sincere, and in his desperation to believe, he found himself almost entirely convinced. It was weird and impossible that the boy who had bullied him had over gone such a transformation.

"And you?" James asked. "Have you always liked me?"

Severus coloured a little at this and James let out a small chuckle. "How long?" he asked in a low voice, genuinely curious

"A little while," Severus answered reluctantly. He saw no harm in being honest about this part. "Since the end of third year. That summer was hell." And it was. Severus had been undergoing peculiar feelings that year, first wondering at his growing attraction to Lily, and then had the carpet pulled completely from beneath his feet when this was overtaken, at lightning speed, by his unexpected pull towards James.

He'd doubted himself all summer as to his feelings, waiting for September when he'd come face to face with James again, and he could analyse his emotions properly.

Of course, James had found him on the train, hexed the pants off him, laughed in his face and Severus had been hard as rock. He may have thought he'd some sick twisted response to violence, but he'd never felt anything more than pure, white hot hatred towards the other marauders.

James listened patiently to his story. It wasn't until Severus had finished that he realised how heavily he'd been drinking.

"You done?" James motioned to his empty draught, but was already paying.

James led Severus from the restaurant and they stood awkwardly on the step outside. "It's still early. How about we take a walk before lunch?" he suggested.

Severus agreed and once again they hid themselves from the world under James's invisibility cloak.

Severus drifted in and out of moods as he walked, silence befalling them once again. He stumbled slightly every now and again on the hem of the robe, which James seemed to find amusing. Severus would have found his humour irritating had there not been hand about his waist each time he tripped, that held him steady, and what seemed to be genuine concern lighting James's features, if but for a moment.

James eventually gave up on trying to catch him each time, and left his hand on Severus's waist, pulling him closer to his side.

"Better?" he murmured, rejecting the surprising warmth he felt as the Slytherin moulded to his side, fitting against him far too comfortably.

Severus heart beat unevenly in his chest. On the one hand, he was reveling in this chance to be close to James, but on the other was a stronger feeling, that was so repulsed by what he was doing and with whom, that it was almost unbearable.

James, undergoing a predicament of his own, brought an end to the thickening silence.

"What do you want to do when you leave Hogwarts then?"

When he didn't get an answer, he glanced down and found Severus deeply in thought, as if he'd never really considered this question seriously before.

"You don't know?" he prompted, interested, despite himself, of what the answer might be.

"No, I think I know," Severus answered finally. Unconsciously, he lifted his free hand to his forearm and held it there, ghosting his fingers over the fabric of his shirt.

James frowned, confused at his actions, but Severus dropped his hand the next second, drawing himself from his reverie, and answered normally. "I want to work with potions." He would not tell James of his true desires. He couldn't, even if he wanted to, for fear of being sent to Azkaban. A lifelong devotion to the rising powers of Lord Voldemort was not something he thought the

Gryffindor would take kindly to.

Instead, Severus gave his second option if all else failed.

James nodded his understanding. Severus was the only one who seemed able to effortlessly keep up in potions class, except from Lily. It was just that she was favoured over him by Slughorn, and his work frequently went overlooked, that meant that no one really took note of Severus' natural skill. A career with cauldrons and a dark, dripping dungeon seemed to suit Severus somehow.

"And you?" Severus asked, having no doubt it would be something in the line of attaining world fame.

A dark look fell across James features for a moment, and he answered carefully. "There are dark forces at work at the moment, Severus," he said in a low voice, "I don't know if you're entirely aware..." Severus held back a snort. "But if I had a job, I think it would be to fight it."

This did not surprise Severus. The paths they would take were always going to be opposite. Light vs. Dark. They had already chosen their fate.

"And after that?" he inquired.

James shrugged. "Who knows?" He didn't add that a nice big house with a white picket fence, full of Lily Potter's children, sounded more than appealing. Perhaps some auror training and international quidditch practice to add some adventure.

"Shall we sit down and take off the cloak?" he asked suddenly, stopping in a secluded spot behind a row of houses. It was hot and stuffy under the cloak and he did not like the strange feelings that stirred within him at having Severus so close.

Severus nodded and was grateful for the fresh air. There was only so long he could stand James' musky scent.

"So, where do you want to go for lunch?" James asked, feigning excitement while discreetly checking his watch. This wasn't as entirely boring as it could be, but it was hard work. He wanted to get back to Hogwarts before dinner and discuss his progress with Remus.

Regardless, they had a little while to wait yet, so James forced himself to remain attentive.

"I don't know," Severus answered predictably. "Do you not have somewhere in mind?"

"I know a few places," James said, stripping himself of his outer robe and laying it out for them to sit on. Severus hesitated, but joined him a moment later on the floor.

The sun was getting hotter on their backs as they sat in silence, neither having the courage nor inspiration to break it. Finally Severus turned to James, whipping a loose strand of hair away from his eyes.

"What shall we do to pass the time?" he asked. "What is it you normally do on these... dates?"

Wouldn't you like to know? James thought with a wicked smile. He quickly hid it, as Severus was watching him carefully, and thought seriously for a moment. There was nowhere he could really take Severus that wasn't full of students from the castle at this time of day. They couldn't chance being caught. But, then again, he couldn't have Severus getting bored...

James undid his collar, pulling away his tie and suggesting that Severus do the same. "It's hot, isn't

it?" he muttered, thinking fast of how he could amuse his date. "Stupid suit."

His thoughts took an abrupt change as he leant casually back against the wall and eyed Severus, appreciating the white expanse of neck that had recently been made available to him, as Severus slowly undid the top buttons of his shirt.

Before he could bring an abrupt end to his actions, his traitorous eyes made a slow path down the Slytherin's body. It wasn't exactly toned, but thin and awkward. James swallowed appreciatively, suddenly restless.

He could feel Severus' gaze hot on his face. The Slytherin was most likely blushing, but James couldn't find it in himself to care as he continued soaking up the other's physique. The small, forbidden body of Severus Snape held certain appeal to James. If it had belonged to a different person, he probably wouldn't have hesitated in claiming it.

Who would have thought Severus could have a body that pleased him? It wasn't conventionally beautiful, nothing about him was, but James could not say, now that he really looked properly, that he found him unattractive.

But what was under those clothes was a different story... It was a mystery. He wouldn't ever know it, and for some reason, James found that this bothered him. He brushed the feeling off and brought his eyes back up to Severus' face.

Severus, however, was also conveniently distracted. He was taking advantage of James' silence to eye up his date in return.

James chuckled darkly as he quickly noticed their predicament. No matter either if their intentions, their growing desire for each other, physically at least, was clear.

Severus looked away and his cheeks tinged with red again, caught out. James almost smiled, and for the first time, decided to pick the Slytherin up on this certain habit. "Why do you always get so embarrassed?" he asked softly, genuinely curious. "What are you so shy about? You're beautiful."

Severus didn't answer, but James wouldn't let him keep avoiding him. He lifted his chin up with a finger. "I'm not going to laugh," he said as Severus eyes found his. "Not anymore. I don't mind you looking at me. You know I'm doing exactly the same thing to you."

Severus swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again, forcing some confidence onto himself. He moved back slightly, and with a pointed smirk at James, deliberately followed the curves of his body with dark eyes.

James was taken back slightly by Severus's actions, but allowed them, pleased that Severus was finally willingly showing that he was interested in him. He refused to acknowledge the nerves that were twisting their way into his stomach, as he became irrationally anxious as to how pleasing the Slytherin would determine him. He was completely confident with his body personally, there was no doubt, but it was Severus' opinion that mattered now, not his own.

When James found only lust at the front of Severus' eyes, as they trailed a slow path back to his face, he let out a small breath of relief and decided it was time to reclaim his authority.

He moved slowly, and almost in a way that could be described as predatory, as he inched forwards to straddle Severus. Automatically, Severus' hands reached up to hold onto his hips, and James smirked.

On realising what he had done, Severus made to snatch his hands back, but James covered them

with his own, shaking his head. "No. You got it right first time."

Keeping himself light, he stretched up a finger to push back the hair that stuck at Severus' collar to fully expose his neck.

Severus remained silent, his eyes dark and curious. He made no move to stop what was happening, which was all the consent James needed.

James pushed himself closer, so that his erection was pressed against the flat of Severus' stomach; an intense arousal that even now dumbfounded him. What was Severus doing to him? And why was it only now that he could really enjoy Severus' presence? Why could they not connect this way in the restaurant? It was as though their bodies knew more than they did, and had a unique relationship of their own.

If James needed to convince Severus he was serious about this relationship, he saw no other way than this. He was not going to sit here in silence, and waste the day away, when his body was just begging for it. There was nothing else to do. If he allowed Severus to grow bored, then he'd failed in his intentions entirely with regard to their date.

Severus' lips were warm and soft under his own, and just as glorious as he remembered. Here it was, James thought in satisfaction. The only way in which he felt any closer to the boy than a million miles.

He stopped for only a second, to allow them oxygen, before plunging back. He knew he shouldn't be doing this, despite the innocent intentions he convinced himself of. There was nothing worse than doing this again, but as Severus shifted under him to accommodate his weight, emitting a soft groan and unintentionally creating delightful friction, James could not stop.

He eventually moved from his mouth to that great expanse of neck that he so wanted to taste. It was so deathly pale, as if it had never seen the sun. James could not have named the sounds Severus was making as he bit, sucked and stroked the flesh with his tongue, but he reveled in being the first one to show him pleasures such as these.

The hands on his hips were gripping so hard it was almost painful, but as Severus seemed to be dragging him closer rather than pulling him away.

Severus' head was spinning. Here we go again, he thought, as even despite the disgust he felt, his body began to react to the administrations it was under. A strange sensation was building up in his belly, making him feel out of breath and sending far too much blood between his legs.

The Gryffindor's wet, hot mouth nibbled along the side of Severus' jaw, a hand tangled at the base of his neck to keep him in place.

Severus grunted, tilting his head, uncomfortable with his own arousal, even as it made its excitement known. Swallowing thickly, he clung onto James' hips, his heart beating wildly and his eyes wide and cautious over his shoulder.

James' hand was inching towards his crotch before Severus could gather his bearings. It was only when his trousers slackened considerably that he realised James had unzipped his flies. A warm hand slipped past his waistband and rested on the front of his boxers, atop his clothed erection.

Severus instantly stiffened, pulling back sharply and dislodging James' lips from his heated skin.

"Wha..?" He took a deep breath. "What are you doing?"

"Touching you. I thought that was obvious." He moved forwards again, with clear intention, but Severus pushed him back with more force than before.

"No," he said, almost scared by how much he did not want that to happen. "Please, no." James Potter would not touch him. Not there. He wouldn't have it. He couldn't...

"Ok, alright," James said quickly as he registered the others' panic. "Hey... It's ok." Shit. He hadn't meant to get that far ahead of himself, not that he thought Severus would object.

Wincing, he slipped carefully from Severus lap to give him some space. Now that he took in the boy's flushed face and rapidly shaking body, James wondered just how much of his reaction had been panic.

Cautiously moving closer again, he took the Slytherin's face in his hands and licked his lips softly, calming him. James felt a surge of nausea overcome him at the thought of causing Severus this much panic. It was irrational... stupid. He'd done far worse to him than this.

James kept his movements gentle, hoping to reassure now rather than arouse the boy further.

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to do," he said finally, ignoring the tightness in his pants that clearly protested to this. He had to remind himself that Severus had never been touched before and they'd barely begun this new relationship.

"I'm sorry," he said, more so for scaring him than for any setbacks it may have had on his plan. He wasn't a rapist for god's sake.

"You want to carry on, take it slow or stop?" James asked finally as Severus's eyes remained closed, and his breathing slowly evened.

"We're in the middle of Hogsmeade," Severus reminded him with a small smirk. Subconsciously, he was cupping himself, having securely fastened his trousers once again, as though in defense against a repeat performance. "Are you really that desperate?"

James snorted at his forwardness. "It wouldn't take long," he replied, not adding that he'd done the very same thing in these backstreets on countless occasions.

Severus snorted but did not disagree. He stood up and handed James his cloak, demonstrating some admirable self-control. "Lunch Potter?"

For some inexplicable reason, the rest of the day passed in relative comfort for them both, their awkwardness conforming to an almost natural manor.

Severus had regained his confidence after their little fumble and seemed to find it amusing which, to James, was something new, not having witnessed such an emotion on the Slytherin before. He decided he liked it.

They shared grins and James had to mentally slap himself when he found himself growing excited by the prospect of being alone with Severus again. He would not kiss him again! He would not try to dry hump the poor guy. He would leave things as they were. Sex did not create love, nor did it help its progress. He would not succumb to his damn teenage hormones, and made a note to ask Remus if there was a temporary cure to them, for that is what he was sure was causing his irrational behaviour towards Snape. What else could it be?

Lunch was not as horrible an affair as it could have been, even if it wasn't particularly fluent in conversation. James found himself falling more naturally into his role as a date hostess. He had to

catch himself every once in a while and remember to make sure his intentions were very clear. Severus, on the other hand, was equally as eager to please, making a dispute near impossible.

Their stilted conversation carried them through their quick lunch and, neither having the desire to stay any longer in Hogsmeade under such pressures, they made their way slowly back up to the castle.

James was pleased with the achievement he had gained. Severus definitely seemed more comfortable in his presence. He could call the day a success.

They had barely made it back inside Hogwarts grounds when raised voices caught their ears. What they saw had Severus shrinking back against the cloak. James felt a sweaty hand clasp his own and, almost unconsciously, his fingers wound round to let him know it was acceptable.

James felt increasingly sick as he watched the scene before them unfold. It wasn't as though he'd not seen this before...just never from this angle.

Sirius had a first year Slytherin hanging upside down from his ankles. The young boy's face was pale and contorted in fear but he was silent, as though he was determined not to scream. Sirius seemed to take offense to this and was shaking the boy so hard that his hair flopped in front of his face and he couldn't see, much to the pleasure of the mounting crowds.

Peter was laughing hardest of all and Remus...which made James feel most ill, was sat with his back to them, his head determinedly pressed into his book, his eyes carefully focused, as if he could block out their blood curdling cheers if he simply refused to believe it was happening. James refused to feel sorry... He refused to feel guilt but he could not stop the tide Severus had set in motion.

These were his friends...and it so easily could have been him.

When he realised the whole cloak was shaking, he turned back to see Severus in a mix between fear and anger. He was shaking so bad he could barely move.

"Shit, Severus," he breathed, pushing him backwards. "Don't watch for god's sake."

James moved them backwards but it was no use. He'd seen now and he'd have to do something. Severus was looking up at him now with accusing, terror filled eyes. He was scared. James felt something constrict and opened his mouth to speak but something seemed to break in the air around them a high pitched screaming deafened their ears. The first year had given in.

"Stay here," James hissed, stepping from under the cloak and approaching the group.

"Hey," he called, adrenaline pounding his veins, forcing every other thought and feeling from his mind as he concentrated on what he must do. But how was he to put down his best friend in front of a group of his admirers?

Both Severus' presence and his newly found conscience, as reluctant as it was, forced him into action. This was his chance to show he was a changed man. He thought fast.

Sirius turned immediately towards the sound of his voice in surprise.

"Hey, James," he replied with a smirk, as though he were enjoying a great treat, "we didn't expect you back so soon. You can give me a hand with this." He twirled the boy round a few times to greater screaming.

James swallowed thickly, wondering why it was only now that this display was making him feel so sick.

"Stop it, Sirius," he said in a low voice, "that's enough."

"What?"

James felt himself sweating. Damn this was hard. He opened his mouth to say it again but the words would not come. Now he knew why Remus always kept so quiet.

He searched for an excuse. Anything other than the truth.

"Don't you know who he's mates with?" he said quietly, grasping straws, "those seventh years...that Slytherin gang."

Sirius eyes widened. "Really?" he frowned but there was a hint of fear on his face now. "This guy?"

James nodded his head and forced a grin. "So let him down yeah? I don't want that lot on our backs."

Sirius did so, letting the boy fall to a heap on the floor before crouching in front of him and casting a memory spell that only he could have accomplished at such a young age.

"Okay, nothing to see here," he called to the crowd, who were muttering and glancing at James suspiciously, who ignored them. The boy got unsteadily to his feet, took one look at Sirius and ran in the direction of the castle.

James felt the frown on his face and quickly smoothed it to a neutral expression as Sirius and Peter approached him. He gave them a grin, while his insides suffered turmoil. What the hell had that been? He'd never cared about this before... It had to be something to do with the fact he could still taste Severus on his lips...

"So how'd it go?" Sirius asked, stowing his wand away in his jeans pocket. "The date?"

James took a moment to answer, seeing Sirius and himself in a whole new way. He couldn't believe they were monsters. They weren't bad people. Were they?

"James?" Remus appeared at their side. "Where's Severus?"

James swallowed again. "He's waiting for me. Under the cloak. He was scared...He saw what you were doing," he explained, keeping his voice low. "I had to stop. It would have been suspicious otherwise."

Sirius nodded, glancing over his shoulder with narrowed eyes at where he guessed Severus was.

"I better go back," James said, turning away from them.

"Wait," Remus called him back, urgent now. "Severus needs to believe you don't do this stuff anymore. You can't be associated with us. Not after this. Punch Sirius. We have to split."

"What the fuck-?" Sirius asked horrified but a fist had collided with the side of his jaw before another second had passed, and he was thrown backwards.

James had known exactly what Remus meant. Severus had to know he was separated from this part of his life for good which, unfortunately, meant no more Sirius. He was alone now. He rubbed his sore knuckles and gave his friend an apologetic grimace, refusing to acknowledge the satisfaction

hitting him had brought.

He hadn't just punched Sirius then, he'd punched himself then and knew, without a doubt, that that part of his life...the bullying, the intimidation... It was over. It was sad that it had taken him that long to finally see it that way, but it would take Sirius even longer.

"Sorry mate," he whispered with a pang of guilt as his best friend swore loudly.

He shared a last look with Remus and jogged back to the place where he knew Severus was still hiding.

"Severus," he called.

"Over here," a small voice answered and James sighed in relief.

"Let's go," he said, maneuvering himself under the cloak and they fell into step, passing silently by the remainder of the marauders and back up towards the castle. Their date was over.

## Chapter 8

James followed the insistent tugging on his sleeve, registering only dimly that the air around him seemed to be getting colder and the lights darker.

"What?"

James blinked.

"I said: what?" Severus repeated patiently, looking up at him with a mixture of concern, anxiety, fear and almost something akin to amusement. "You were muttering..."

"Was I? It was nothing. Where are we?" he asked suddenly, realising for the first time he didn't actually know. Everywhere was dark and he could just make out Severus pale face, staring apprehensively up at his own.

"We're in the dungeons," Severus answered, as if this were very obvious. "I brought you-"

"The dungeons?" James repeated, realising for the first time that his breath was appearing in front of his face as mist, and that he was shivering, "but wha-"

"Do you want to come to my room? Just to...Talk. Or something. If you want."

James stared down at him silently, adrenaline still pounding through his veins. His head hadn't quite caught up with his body yet.

"I didn't mean to suggest...I just...I saw what happened with Black," Severus continued uncertainly, "And if you're not with them, maybe..."

"I'll go with you," James finished for him with a short nod of approval. "It's fine, Severus."

He could feel only relief that Severus had been deceived by his apparent split from his friends, and did not appear at all suspicious about what had just taken place.

"Which way?" James asked urgently. He only half-listened as Severus explained to him, a room that he sometimes used, a room that no one else used more importantly, and meant he could be alone.

Severus once again bravely grasped his hand in his own, as James's eyes grew distant and pensive with thoughts of Sirius, and pulled him along.

Just when James was getting tired and beginning to regret his decision to go, Severus stopped them beside two pillars wedged closely together and fumbled in his jacket for his wand. He tapped them, as James watched, and instantly they sprung apart, creating a small dark gap that appeared to be a tunnel.

Severus turned to James suddenly and eyed him as if analysing his size, but as James raised an eyebrow in inquiry, he looked away nervously and lowered himself, with a grace James hadn't thought him capable, into the gap and out of sight. James assumed that that meant he'd fit too and, sucking in a breath, forced his own, taller and muscular torso through the tight space.

If Severus had been more popular, James may have been slightly more cautious of entering somewhere so unknown, and perhaps suspect an ambush on the other side but, as things were, he

thought he'd gained enough of the Slytherin's trust not to be worried and, regardless, he wasn't afraid of Severus in the slightest.

He stumbled out into a small, high ceiling-ed circular room. He straightened up and dusted himself off, careful not to knock one of the many cauldrons set in neat rows about the room. There must have been dozens, though most were sitting empty and ancient looking.

However, there were a few simmering away, casting odd light about the room. Aside from this, the room looked almost like a small house, all compressed into a very tiny place. Slytherin banners lined every square inch of the walls and, on noticing this, James couldn't suppress a grimace.

He heard a snort of amusement at the predictable reaction and turned to see Severus watching him with a small, hesitant, yet knowing grin on his face. James frowned in confusion at the expression. Severus never grinned or did anything like it... James felt his stomach flutter slightly at the odd, unexpected sensation this unfamiliar, albeit not wholly unattractive change.

Distracted, James's left foot snagged on the protruding base of a cauldron, and with a very undignified yelp, he tripped and fell painfully in a tangle of limbs.

Face tinged with embarrassment, he allowed Severus to help him up. Their faces were far too close as they rose together. Severus looked torn between expressing his amusement and issuing an apology.

"What is this place?" James asked, disconcerted by the tingling sensation that Severus's rich, surprisingly pleasant laugh caused within him and wanting to distract himself from it. He cleared his throat and took a step back.

"It's a room I found in my first year here. I didn't mean to. You were chasing me at the time actually," Severus explained, smothering his rare smile and moving back over to the hole in the wall to replace the wooden board that covered it, "I'd never come this far into the dungeons before. I don't think anyone ever has. I think it was just an old, abandoned room that got closed up but..." He motioned towards the walls, "I decorated."

"I can see that," James said dryly, taken off guard for a moment by the confidence that had grown in Severus's voice. He had a very distinguished sound when he spoke properly. James was keen to keep him talking now that he seemed more able. "And the cauldrons?"

"I like to brew," Severus shrugged, "they're not dangerous. Do you want to...I could...If you wanted to see-"

James rolled his eyes, refusing to let his affection at the predictability of Severus's uncertainty compete with his exasperation. "Show me the damn potions, Severus."

Severus narrowed his eyes but began eagerly explaining its functions and James, though not understanding or being remotely interested in what Severus was so animatedly describing, could at least appreciate the passion he conveyed. He knew Severus liked potions but he'd never realised just how much.

Certainly, he hadn't thought him capable of passion. Not the mean, cold boy who regarded everything he met with such caution and hostility. But now his eyes lit up in a way that James had not before seen, and it was rather entrancing to witness such a change to come about the usually so grouchy and indifferent Slytherin.

For a moment, James forgot his anxiety over Sirius and just listened.

"What?" Severus asked suddenly, on his guard, and James's realised he'd been staring perhaps a little too openly. He hadn't meant to make Severus's uncomfortable, but he was learning quickly that this was a very hard thing to achieve.

"Nothing. Just...You're really passionate about this, Severus. I had no idea."

Severus nodded, glad that James appeared to be approving of this. "I am."

James gradually moved from the cauldrons and began to explore the rest of the room. He should have known Severus would know a place like this...It was so fitting. He'd imagined many times Severus Snape lurking around a dank, dungeon cave, all alone and miserable.

Severus watched James closely as he took in their surroundings, eager for his good opinion . He'd surprised himself by bringing James, of all people, here to this place that had served as his haven so many times. Just a few days ago he would have died rather than permit the Gryffindor entrance to such a personal treasure, but somehow, after today and all he'd seen with Sirius, he was feeling strangely accepting towards James. And what was this, if not an opportunity to progress in his plan?

"Do you like it?" he asked suddenly.

James turned back to him. "Mmm...Of course," he nodded but Severus was not fooled. James was very much Gryffindor and, if he intended on keeping him for a while, he may need to consider redecorating.

Silence settled between them and, fully aware that he was the host, Severus shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, thinking of a way to entertain his guest now that he had him here.

"What you did back there..." he said abruptly, his nerves making his speech unnatural. He felt the need to say something about James's earlier dispute with his friends, uncomfortable with it hanging between them. "I think it was...It was very brave what you did. And I'm glad you won't be with Black anymore. He is just as bad as you...as you... used to be. He isn't a good influence. And the wolf..."

James caught himself from sticking up for his friend, for they weren't his friends anymore, as far as Severus was concerned.

"I told you. I've changed," he said quietly, wondering just how much this was true now, and braced himself for a much greater lie. "I don't want to be with them anymore. I'm not like them."

"Yes," Severus agreed, a small unconscious smile lightening his face for a moment as he acknowledged this. He'd no doubt in his mind now that this was so. He couldn't express the sheer delight he'd felt on witnessing James punch Sirius and walk away without a backward glance. It was more than he could have ever asked for. He'd needed them separated and now it had happened, without him having to do anything at all to intervene.

"Tea?" he asked finally, as James said nothing further on the matter and the silence between them stretched.

"Huh? Oh, yeah sure," James answered with a shrug.

Severus wandered over to the sink and filled a muggle kettle, his wand laying the side so that he could make tea the muggle way. James watched, amused. The boy was most curious in his ways. He'd never met anyone like Severus which was of course, James convinced himself, a very good thing...

He stood awkwardly for a moment before taking a deep breath and joining him.

"It's very homey here," he murmured in his ear, curving his arms round Severus's waist. The Slytherin jumped in surprise, immediately tensing, but James held him steady. "And I do like it here," he continued in a firmer tone. "But I am a Gryffindor. I don't like snakes."

Severus nodded, James's hot breath on the back of his neck very distracting. "Yes I know...Sorry. Sugar?"

"No, but I know something else I want," James spun him round so that Severus was in his arms and instantly, in their close proximity, all the confidence Severus had gained from being in his own territory drained from his face. James didn't know whether this more pleased or irritated him. He wanted to remain in control, but he also desperately wanted Severus to be comfortable with him. He didn't want to push things too fast and scare Severus, but he was conscious of his deadline, and needed to establish a proper relationship which meant regular contact.

"Are you confident in me doing this?" he asked, hooking a finger under Severus's chin and tilting his head up so that he could read his expression. "You understand, Severus that I am your lo-"

Severus choked, struggling briefly in James's arms before slumping back into the embrace, looking completely torn.

James sighed, irritated with Severus's immature reaction to the word 'lover', and pointedly moved his hands from the Slytherin's waist, to the counter behind him.

"Better?"

With an apologetic grimace, Severus nodded miserably, ashamed at himself for showing himself up so badly. "Sor-"

"Don't apologise," James cut him off abruptly, "Just tell me what you want. I think it's time for us to put our relationship into words, and I can't do that if you won't communicate with me, Severus. You have to tell me what you are comfortable with. And what...not."

Severus took a deep breath. A relationship, the requirement to actually make himself coherent, acknowledging the fact that someone else actually cared for him...It was all very new to him. Even being this close to someone else physically was proving more difficult than he'd ever expected. James was the opposite, and of course he would find this difficult to understand.

"Talk to me," James's voice broke into his thoughts. A hand was raised to his forehead and Severus felt James gently smooth the creases away with his thumb. "Calm down," he murmured, "I'm not going to hurt you. Just tell me...Are you comfortable?" he repeated slowly. "If you want this to be a...non-physical relationship, just say so. I can live with that."

In fact it would probably be better, James thought.

"I am fine with it," Severus lied stubbornly, forcing himself to be still.

He couldn't push James away; it would be fatal to his plan, no matter how uncomfortable he was with this intimacy. He knew James was very physical with his girlfriends, so he would have to be equally as accepting, or James would go elsewhere.

A big part of Severus did enjoy being touched by James, very much, but until the rest of him caught up, he'd remain frigid. He couldn't seem to help it.

"You're a very bad liar, Severus Snape," James murmured, amused yet annoyed also. Severus was making this very hard work for him. "I know you enjoy being close to me...I know you enjoy me kissing you."

As he said this, he lowered his head and planted a small, delicate kiss on Severus's neck.

"But," he added, before bringing his lips to the pale skin once again, applying a little more pleasure, "I know it scares you and, as much as you may think it, Severus, not all of you has forgiven me yet. You are still repulsed by me." Severus shivered from both arousal and disgust, as James's tongue traced patterns on his skin, proving the point.

"No!" Severus gasped, wriggling. "I'm no-"

"Yes, you are," James looked him directly in the eyes, "and it's ok. I understand. We'll just have to work on it."

Severus had to fight not to look away, James's gaze was so intense. He looked liked he really wanted it...Severus just couldn't work out why. "What are yo-?"

"I'm asking you to be my..." James thought for a moment, "my boyfriend, I suppose. I want to make us official. What do you say?"

Severus's breath caught in his throat and his eyes widened.

James could see he was terrified and desperately, in his need for him to say yes, was forced to influence his answer. He resumed his kissing of Severus neck, more deliberately this time. Severus hissed at the sensations and, subconsciously, tilted his head back, providing James with better access.

"Wouldn't you like that?" James murmured seductively, finding a particular soft spot that made Severus gasp and sucking on it relentlessly with practiced patience.

Boyfriend? Severus repeated the word in his head, feeling it out. James's boyfriend? Wasn't that what he'd been aiming for? James seemed to want it desperately, enough to make Severus's head spin with wonder, and again he was incredulous and exhilarated by the thought. James Potter wanted him. Not some beautiful, perfect blonde that he could so easily have. Him. Severus Snape. And just the way he was, insecurities and all. They would work through it, that is what James had implied. It was enough to make Severus question his sanity.

James trailed a wet path to Severus's jaw, impatient for an answer. Finally, he was pushed back gently and Severus's eyes caught his own, silently asking for conformation.

James nodded sincerely. "I'm being serious, Severus. Give me a chance. That's all I ask." He kept his face full of sincerity but, for a moment, couldn't help but smile in response to the giddiness on the Slytherin's face as he listened. James could well understand it. He'd seen it many times with those that were lucky enough to be his lover. Severus must feel on top of the world with someone like him asking him out. He marveled again, as he did so many times, how Severus could believe in it.

"So Severus Snape...Will you will be my boyfriend?" he asked again, for confirmation, as if the incredibility on Severus's face wasn't enough. He needed assurance. This was a vital step, and it would also be a step towards redemption if he could go back and tell Sirius he'd succeeded this much.

"Yes," Severus agreed shakily.

"Excellent," James beamed, oblivious to the dark look that shadowed Severus's elation. A huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders in forcing them this far.

Severus noticed the lack of contact immediately, as James instantly drew back and took his tea, wandering back across the room.

"So you just found this place?" he asked, casually over his shoulder, as if nothing of significance had happened just a second ago.

"Urr...yes," Severus answered, his excitement dwindling as quickly as it has arisen. He couldn't help feeling slightly cold at James's abrupt change in behaviour.

James sipped at his tea and sat down on a couch, beckoning Severus to join him as if it were his room, not Severus's.

"And no one else knows about it?" he asked, deciding his potential use for it in future.

He raised an eyebrow at Severus in questioning, noticing that the Slytherin seemed put out by something. It didn't take him long to work out what he was, and he had to stop himself from laughing. A large, purplish bruise was appearing on Severus's neck where it was still wet with saliva.

Slightly gross, he acknowledged, but stimulating nonetheless; a contradiction that he was growing increasingly accustomed to around Severus. It was strange. This boy was intriguing and incredibly erotic in ways that he didn't even have a clue.

"Just me and Lily," Severus answered his question, moving to sit next to him on the sofa and leaving a deliberate gap between them. "And now you."

"Evans?" James asked, distracted for a moment. "Yeah, I forgot. You two are really chummy."

Some sort of resentful expression must have shown on his face, as Severus suddenly looked wide eyed and worried about what he had said. James realised, with a small condescending measure of affection, that Severus must have taken his reaction as jealousy of him with Lily, and not the other way around, as it rightly was. James was jealous of Lily's closeness with Severus, not vice versa, and it was just further proof of consolidation of his plan that Severus would think this way.

James's didn't put him right, but played along, hiding his amusement.

"You're always with her..." he said, lowering his eyes and imagining Lily with Severus, and a number of other guys, and not him, in order to keep his bitter expression in place.

"I don't..." Severus stammered, undone by the thought that James would be jealous of someone else with him. "Lily and I aren't...We're friends. She's all I have."

"You have me now, Severus," James reminded him. "You don't need her."

"But I...There's nothing going on. I swear. We just..."

Subconsciously, Severus was moving closer to James along the sofa, in his desperation to explain. "She's nothing. Nothing. You are...You are my..."

A slow, satisfied smile spread across James's face as, for the first time, Severus was forced to put words to his own feelings.

"I'm you're what?" James repeated, feigning confusion in the hope to make Severus say it.

"I'm your..." A small bead of sweat had gathered on Severus's forehead and he struggled to speak clearly. "You're my..."

Severus was arm to arm with James now and whispered, almost inaudibly, "boyfriend."

"Pardon?" James asked loudly. "Severus, I don't understand wha-"

"You are my boyfriend," Severus cried, his voice shaking slightly as he fought his nerves. "My boyfriend..."

James grinned, satisfied.

"I thought you said you were good at this?" Severus teased lightly, watching in amusement as James screwed his face up in concentration.

"I am!" James argued, "you're just..."

"Far more accomplished than you."

James looked up sharply. He was certainly discovering a whole new side to Severus during this game. Usually he was indeed very good at chess, but it seemed that he'd underestimated Severus's abilities. He was being steadily beaten and Severus was doing nothing to hide the fact.

Severus's increasing confidence was also something he was being forced to contend with. He put it down to their surroundings. Of course Severus would feel more confident on his own turf and James berated himself for not considering it earlier. This was exactly the place to get Severus to open up more. He made a note to invite himself down here more often.

James finally moved a piece, his tongue stuck between his teeth in concentration, and Severus winced.

"What?" James cried at the expression, "stop doing that. That was a perfectly good mo-"

"Checkmate."

James's face dropped and Severus smirked. They both watched silently as James's king was brutally beaten to a pulp, its player looking incredibly sulky to Severus's amusement.

James Potter really was a sore loser, and Severus gained great satisfaction at beating him at something.

"I think we've played this long enough," James said, shaking his head and getting to his feet, his pride severely beaten. "Well done," he said stiffly, formally holding out a hand for Severus to shake.

"Thank you," Severus smothered a smile, as he briefly grasped his hand in his own, before gathering their cups and carrying them over to the sink.

"Did you see where I put my shoes, Severus?" James asked absently, grabbing his jacket. "For fucks sake...It's only been...Blimey, Severus," his eyes widened as he looked at his watch. "Do know what time it is?"

"You're leaving?" Severus ignored the disappointment he felt as James nodded and shrugged into his jacket.

"It's getting late, Severus. We already missed dinner," James replied, moving to his hands and knees to look under the sofa. "For the love of Merlin..." he muttered irritably, causing Severus to snicker.

He lifted his wand. "Accio James Potter's shoes."

James was hit in the stomach as two shiny black objects came flying his way.

"Thanks, Severus," he winced and rubbed the spot, but smiled to let him know he wasn't angry. Severus seemed to have the tendency to cower whenever he'd done something wrong. James would one day question him on it, but not today. He didn't want to break the light, comfortable atmosphere that had developed between them after hours of mindless games and light, undemanding conversation.

Severus, having retired of his jacket and tie a few hours ago, fiddled with the cuffs on his shirt. "If you wanted to win you could've warned me..."

James looked confused for a moment and then laughed. "I'm not going because I lost. Is that what you think of me? I know I'm a sore loser, Severus but I guess I'll have to get used to it with you as my boyfriend."

The word again caused Severus to blush. He couldn't help it. James felt something very akin to affection as he witnessed it, though he brushed it off. He'd never have thought it, but Severus's innocence and his bashfulness, so adverse to his usual harsh character, was very appealing.

"It really is late. I have to go," he forced himself to say. It was time for him to confront Sirius.

Severus nodded and leaned forwards expectantly, his lips parting. James looked at him, perplexed for a moment, before he realised what he was waiting for.

"My, my...Expecting something, Severus?" he teased, unable to help himself.

Severus's face glowed redder than James had yet seen it, his mouth clamping together as he instantly stepped back. "No. I just-'

"It seems like you're getting used to this intimacy faster than we thought," James said approvingly, ignoring Severus embarrassment to pull him forwards and place a warm, chaste kiss on his lips before departing.

...

Severus replaced the board carefully, covering the small entrance to his private room as James left, a faint smile on his face. It didn't take him long to clear up the mess they had made.

A pillow and some thin sheets were easily found and he quickly made the bed more comfortable, eager now to get to sleep before he allowed his mind to overrun any further with the day's events. He didn't trust himself, at this time, not to bring more significance to James's actions, to his movements...to his endearments, than was necessary. He would not get carried away.

He pulled his shirt over his head and let it drop to the floor, hissing as the cold air of the dungeons met his naked skin. His trousers followed and he pointedly ignored the heated, uncomfortable area between his legs that had been itching to be touched all day.

He carried out his new nightly routine almost as if he was in a daze, being very careful to brush his teeth properly. He scrubbed until he was satisfied his gums were raw, content in the thought that, if

he got over his intense aversion to being touched quickly enough, he may just have that taste return very soon...and perhaps more.

With a small shiver, he dropped the brush into the sink and wiped his lips with a towel. Almost without meaning to, Severus glanced at himself in the mirror as he replaced the cloth in its place, and was taken aback by how different he looked. His lips were curving ever so slightly upwards in a way that wouldn't be called a smile, of any sort, on any normal, happy person, but on him it made a remarkable difference to his features.

His eyes also held a glimmer of life that he couldn't remember seeing for a long while.

His chest, deathly pale and ghost-like in the dim lights of the dungeon, was so thin that his ribs were clearly visible. It was at noticing this that Severus's face swiftly re-organised itself into an expression of grim displeasure, realisation having returned in full force.

A deep sigh wracked through Severus's frame but he didn't stop to acknowledge it.

Severus dug out a clean t-shirt and quickly shrugged into it, hiding himself, though the love bite on his neck was still clearly visible. He closed his eyes for a moment and allowed himself the small pleasure in recalling how good it had felt having James's lips on his skin.

Without opening his eyes, he pressed his wand to the mark and with a muttered spell it disappeared. James would certainly not appreciate it if he turned up to class in such a state, and he'd no desire to be bullied over it.

Severus turned from the mirror without again glancing at it, though he supposed his neck looked remarkably plain without the mark.

## Chapter 9

James edged into the common room sheepishly. The hour was late. All Gryffindors had gone to bed, except for the marauders who were gathered around the common room fire silently, with pensive expressions on their faces.

Taking a deep breath, James stepped forwards bravely, clearing his throat, and winced when Sirius finally glanced up, revealing a large purple bruise around his left eye. Remus had a hand on his shoulder and was holding an ice pack to the side of his face. Peter, sat at their feet, merely looked tired and confused.

"You're such an arse," Sirius grumbled when James offered him a tentative apology, gently taking the pack from his face and surveying the damage.

Sirius winced, throwing Remus a mildly irritated look before turning back to James, his expression growing dark.

"I really am sorry," James explained sincerely. "I never planned for this to happen."

"No," Sirius agreed. "Me neither. But you punched me. Hard. Kind of unfair, don't you think? We should be even."

"What?" James frowned, but was cut off a moment later as something hard connected with the side of his jaw. He staggered backwards, tumbling over an armchair and landing awkwardly in a heap on the floor.

"Sirius!" Remus roared as James swore, a heavy flow of blood cascading down his face.

"That's for almost breaking my jaw," Sirius grumbled.

"Got that out of your system now, Padfoot?" Remus shot him a furious glance. He bent down to help James to his feet. "We talked about this...James had no choice-"

"I knew you'd be immature about this!"

"I am not being immature," Sirius argued, "eye for an eye, mate. Just, next time you want to punch me, warn me first."

James stared for a moment, disbelieving, before shaking his head and groaning loudly as he rubbed his jaw. Silence descended between them, the air crackling with anger and resentment before Remus' calm voice forced them into peace.

"Let's just sit down," he suggested, sounding tired.

After much hesitation and wincing, James allowed Sirius to guide him back to his chair, ignoring the contradictory gentleness with which he was now being treated. He stifled the urge to express his exasperation with his friend's attempt to resolve everything physically as always.

"No hard feelings," Sirius promised as he handed him the ice pack. "Try this, unless you want to go all the way to the infirmary for a salve. I couldn't be arsed. Besides, the girls love it. Wait 'til they see me on Monday, Padfoot. I'm a war hero."

When James continued to glare, Sirius sighed and nudged him with the pack, unrelenting. "Like I

said, we're even. Take it."

With a growl, James snatched it from him.

"So, was it worth it?" Sirius asked finally, sitting opposite him and behaving perfectly friendly towards him once again.

"What?" James snapped, unable to quell his own resentment so quickly.

"Punching me. Was it worth it? Are you and Snape proper pals now?"

"It went as well as I could have expected. There were a few minor hiccups but I think, overall, we're getting somewhere. Love is...well, it's definitely in the picture. I never thought I'd say it, but I think Severus Snape is completely capable of loving me. We may be cutting it tight, time wise, but I'm confident."

James gave a small smile, proud of himself. The lingering tension in his friend's faces, and his own, edged away.

"That's great James," Remus grinned, obviously relieved. "I feared...Well, I thought," he glanced at Sirius, "I'm just glad that your display today wasn't uncalled for. When are you seeing him again?"

James shrugged, flopping back down into a chair, exhausted, and blowing his fringe from his eyes. He could only hope the answer to this question was soon.

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James was commonly rather more generous in his own self reflection than reality permitted. As he regarded his new found freedom from the confines of his friendship group, his arrogance was all too apparent.

Before now, each and every thing he did revolved around his position as one of the infamous four troublemakers. Not anymore. He was to continue his challenge alone, publicly at least.

Remus, especially, was less than keen on the matter, but acknowledged also, with mature wisdom his friends still sadly lacked, that there was little option but to follow up on their staged dispute.

Confident as he was, James looked on this dilemma with only minor trepidation. However, as he strolled down the corridors alone, his sides felt remarkably empty where his friends once loomed, closing him in and empowering him.

He had two choices. Severus was under the false impression that he'd split from his rule breaking posse. He could now cling to another group for a short while, until the end of the bet. It would be easy enough. Anyone in their right mind would welcome him with open arms to their gang; he was James Potter, the person everyone wanted to be.

However, the most logical thing to do would be to connect himself to Severus, and declare his friendship for him throughout the entire school. This was certainly a sound way in which to convince Severus, once and for all, of his sincerity, and though there would be damage to his reputation, all would be forgiven on the night of the ball when James revealed his true intentions.

As practical as this method of approach sounded, James could not help but shy away from such a lonesome idea. He'd no desire to be mocked, no matter if it was only temporary. His pride was far too dominant in his selfish characteristics.

James shivered slightly and pulled his robes more tightly around himself. He'd have to enter the Great Hall shortly, and a decision needed to be made.

A compromise was the solution. He would reintegrate himself with a popular group, one that was respected and idolised, but not for cruel or indecent acts, so as not to upset Severus.

He'd continue his meetings with Severus simultaneously and explain, thoroughly, the reasons for their secrecy. That way, he'd remain a role model, but also please Severus by ignoring his old friends and cursing them, and himself, for their acts of cruelty.

It was not hard to find a suitable group by which to attach himself. James' ready-made excuse for his absence at the marauders' bench was instantly accepted. He approached three figures at the Gryffindor table, sat together in a huddle and eyed appraisingly by those surrounding them.

Second only to the infamous marauders in popularity, these people were a perfect choice. James was only slightly apprehensive of the fact that they were much older than him, and in their final year, though naturally, he had no real fear of rejection.

Steve, Jack and Amy, after brief suspicion, made room for the quidditch captain after he explained that he was in deep trouble with McGonagall, and had been told to stay away from Remus, Peter and Sirius for a while, or risk expulsion.

They were a unique set of people, all distinctly similar, unlike the marauders, and had obviously collected together religiously as a result. An air of careless charm surrounded the three of them, giving a strong sense of presence in their wake.

All incredibly appealing physically, their distinctly average intelligence was overlooked, as was their immaculate school record. Unlike the marauders, their corruption of school policy was far more subtle, enabling them the image of cool, and ensuring that their rich, aristocratic families back home were not shamed by their ill behavior.

Steve, the informal leader of their small group, was a beater on the Gryffindor team. James knew him well, but it was Amy he was more interested in.

Her long blonde hair, slim figure and baby blue eyes ticked all the right boxes in response to teenage hormones. James would jump at the chance to bed her, as would any other guy in their right mind. However, it was common fact that she did not sleep with boys in years below her own, which was why James did a double take when she threw him a suggestive wink.

Composing himself, James returned the look with interest. His heart began to build in excitement, as the two other boys gave each other a knowing look.

James' face fell, along with his excitement, when a Slytherin banner caught his eye. He was suddenly hit by an unpleasant dilemma that he had not yet seriously considered: Sex. Here was one, very lovely young lady, practically offering herself to him on a silver platter. She was his for the taking. Yet James was already spoken for, in the technical sense. He was dating Severus.

Yet, his heart was still very much up for the taking, as was his body. James could not deny a growing restlessness to resume the sexual activities he'd been distracted from for the last few weeks.

James swallowed awkwardly, carefully ignoring the dull throb of arousal that had made itself painfully aware as Amy deliberately slipped a hand between the neck of her robes, splitting them open so that her cleavage was very definitely on display.

A casual, no-strings fuck would do him wonders, James thought recklessly. Why not? Severus would never find out, not if he played it carefully. He had a reputation to sustain and people would get suspicious if the rumours of his sexual explorations were to diminish entirely.

James dropped his eyes from the light blue, imploring ones that stared provocatively into his own, and glanced briefly across at the Slytherin table. Predictably, Severus was sat on his own. His lonely shoulders were hunched as he ate.

James could not help but notice a small, almost ghost of a smile tilting Severus' lips into a satisfied expression, that showed the boy was rather more happy than he looked on first inspection.

Refusing to feel guilty, James ignored his own part in Severus' new contentment, as it made him extremely uncomfortable.

Unintentionally, their eyes met. Severus gave him the smallest of smiles and James felt his stomach clench. He shook the feeling away with irritation, refusing to be affected by those intense black eyes.

He was not going to get any more emotionally involved with Severus, there was no point. He didn't owe Severus anything, certainly not his body. He was not going to grow stale and neglected when there was such willing partners.

Besides, even they were truly committed to each other, infidelity had always been a reasonable concept in James' eyes. He saw no reason to change his attitude now.

...

James threw an arm over his head, breathing heavily, and felt a weight settle across his chest. Sweat dripped from his forehead and his body ached with exhaustion, as he patiently waited for his heart rate to return to normal.

Unconsciously, he pulled the slim, smooth body of his lover closer to his side and let out a long sigh of satisfaction. He'd needed that.

His mind wandered, as the familiar smell of sweat, sex and tobacco filled his senses. Shamefully, James had to admit that tonight hadn't been his best performance.

Admittedly, on this occasion, his skill had lacked when he'd allowed his passion to be driven by a needy lust, caused by the absence of intimate touches in the past few weeks, as he'd given the majority of him time to persuading Severus into friendship, dislodging girls from his agenda.

James felt slightly ashamed for being so inattentive and distracted during the encounter, but he'd found it strangely hard to concentrate.

However, Amy hadn't seemed to notice his impatience with romance. He'd taken the girl rather more roughly than he'd intended.

"I always wondered..." Amy murmured blissfully, trailing absent circles on James' flat stomach, distracting him from his thoughts. "And now I know."

"Wondered what?" James asked tiredly. "How absolutely amazing I was going to be?"

Though a smile was implied by his tone, James' face was expressionless as he awaited an answer. He had a headache and wanted nothing more now but to shower and move away from the stickiness between her thighs that pressed intimately against his leg.

All of a sudden it was far too claustrophobic in Amy's small bed, when James' own contradicting thoughts seemed so much bigger.

He made to lift himself, but Amy pressed herself more forcefully against his chest and raised her head to look at him, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes actually," she admitted. "And you lived up to my expectations, don't worry. You're a very attractive young man, James, and just about the only person I'd break my own, seventh years only, rules for. I've been waiting for this for a long time."

James forced a smile in response to her compliments, leaning forward to kiss her forehead briefly, with affection he did not quite feel.

Her smile widened as she propped herself up on her elbow, moving to trace the prominent bruise on his face. This wasn't the first time she'd paid the mark such delicate attention and James guessed, with gratitude and mild bemusement, that Sirius must've been right. Girls seemed to like what Sirius perceived as a show of strength.

A few minutes later, she sighed contentedly, resting her head once more against his bronze chest.

"You're stressed," she said. It wasn't a question. "Always frowning these days, Potter."

James didn't answer and she didn't press anymore.

Minutes passed into half an hour. Just as James was beginning to doze off, squashed successfully into a mass of fluffy pink pillows, he felt Amy stir from beside him, obviously growing restless. Her palm followed the curve of his hip, stroking his inner thigh, teasing.

Smiling up at him with a wicked gleam in he eye, she allowed him no warning before gripping him intimately.

James sighed inaudibly and forced himself not to tense up against this unwanted attention. He felt tired, weary and oddly unresponsive, but it seemed that his partner was taking his stillness for approval and begun to knead him lazily.

Amy's petite hand moved with experience. It did not take long for her to bring James' limp penis back to half mast, and then with the aid of a warm, succulent mouth, to full arousal.

James' breathing began to speed up and he parted his legs, spreading himself wide to grant her better access. He wasn't in the mood. His head still ached and he needed to find Severus...

He knew he should stop her, but the ministrations were actually starting to feel extremely pleasurable and he couldn't bring himself to care either way.

His mind slowly, despite his former protests, began to fade out of comprehension. He watched lazily as her head bobbed up and down with a vague grimace of pleasure. He could not have asked her to stop now if Severus himself had walked into the room. James found his hands straying towards the silky strands of her hair to dictate her movements, pushing harder, deeper, giving no thought to her comfort.

His head swam and his stomach tensed, lean hips rotating of their own accord. With one hand he pulled the sheet lightly over her head, the distorted movements of the bedsheets allowing for fantasy. White knuckles gripped the headboard and James saw only pitiless black eyes staring into his own.

...

James hated to admit it, but life with Steve, Jack and Amy was decidedly dull. He'd acknowledge, within himself, that cursing people was not something his conscience was anymore entirely accepting of, but doing nothing reckless and against the rules at all, was incredibly boring.

Yes, smoking in the courtyard at break, wearing dark sunglasses and talking in low, drawling voices, was very cool, but it failed in holding his interest for any significant period of time. The same was true for his spontaneous sex with Amy.

It seemed she really did have a thing for him. For fear of upsetting a key member of the group and being thrown from their ranks, James allowed her to do with him as she pleased, benefiting also from the release she was so willing to give.

Regular and uncomplicated sex was an appreciated relief to James, especially after long, exhausting amounts of time in Severus' company, with the sexual tension increasing to such levels that he could barely stand it. The arrangement worked well. It saved James' the time consuming problem of finding girls himself anyhow, something which he was, increasingly, finding a more tiring prospect.

Besides, her experience was unmatchable and she wrought more pleasure from him like no partner, male or female, had ever managed before.

However, this did not stop James' stomach from clenching painfully whenever he passed a laughing Remus, Peter and Sirius in the corridor, as an outsider, excluded. His pride was not so strong that he couldn't admit to himself that it hurt very badly to see them in such a careless mood, without being one of them and burdened down as he was.

"James! Are you coming?" Steve waved him towards their next lesson. "Come on, lets go."

James cast a final, wistful look in the direction of the marauders and followed.

James came to almost look forward to the evenings he spent in Severus's company, secluded in the basement of the school and away from the pressure of his peers. He found it very easy to be himself around Severus, with the more times they spent together, as the smaller boy was far less intimidating and seemingly easy to please, than his new friends.

Playing mindless, childish board games and discussing neutral topics, for the sake of progress, was not as dull as it could have been with such a complex partner.

The boy was, aside from revealing, at the drop of a hat, embarrassment, humiliation, along with many other forms of discomfort, a curiously hard person to read. This meant he was unpredictable, and, though James had assumed he'd known the characteristics of the Slytherin before, found himself wronged. He was only just scraping the surface of all that lay hidden behind Severus' carefully constructed walls, and he could not deny his intrigue in what was left to be discovered.

The only extreme downside was that their meetings could only be held out of school hours, which was when James could be spending with Remus and Sirius. He found it hard to resent Severus too much for this, as he too was giving up his own precious time, so close to exams, to be with him.

"Wolfsbane is not a dreamless sleep potion, James," Severus frowned, leaning over his own homework and glancing at James' with a critical eye. "Nor is a bezoar a planet."

James yawned and nodded absently. "Nope, it's not, is it? Oh well."

The confidence Severus' had gained since their first conversation was remarkable. James regarded him appraisingly as he leaned back, relaxing against the emerald rug they had lain down in front of the fire as they worked and wondering at the change. It made him respect Severus far more as a person, and only increased his interest in the boy.

"Do you not care for a decent grade?" Severus returned to his own work, scribbling furiously with an intensity James could not quite understand, and was always fascinated by.

One thing was for sure, spending time with Severus meant he never left homework to the last minute. The Slytherin was the most organised person he'd ever met, and a complete master of precision.

"What does it matter? I'll get one regardless," James shrugged, far more concerned with appreciating the way the dim light complimented Severus' features far more graciously than normal. His pale skin had taken on a glowing appearance in the firelight, softening his harsh features into something gentler and more appealing, contrasting with the frown lines on the boy's forehead, as he consumed himself with writing.

James realised that he may have sounded far too conceited, just as Severus realised he may be pushing his luck in paying his new boyfriend such little attention, and looked at him properly.

"Why don't we leave this for a while, hmm?" James suggested, tugging the quill from Severus' hand and throwing it to the side. "We can come back to it later."

"But it's in for tomorrow," Severus protested, unable to help himself. "I may not have time--"

"Relax. Live on the dangerous side for once, Severus. The homework can wait. Aren't other things you'd rather be doing?"

Severus coloured at James' raised, suggestive eyebrow. He stared at the lean figure of his boyfriend, spread out in front of the warm fire, the light dancing off his broad shoulders and long legs, and agreed that there definitely was something he'd rather be doing, not that his nerves would ever allow him to admit such a thing, nor actually go through with it.

James smiled knowingly and gently pulled Severus towards him, giving him space to pull back if he wished. When Severus set his jaw, determined to be confident, James tugged more forcefully until they were moulded together.

He shifted into a more vertical position, with Severus pulled against his chest and laying stiffly at his side.

"Comfortable?" James murmured, brushing an impulsive kiss against Severus' temple and feeling his own skin warm pleasantly at the intimacy.

"Yes," Severus answered after a pause, though his rigid posture suggested otherwise.

"Relax," James repeated, reading the lie for what it was, and running skillful hands down the length of Severus' body soothingly, and feeling him shudder under his touch. "I'm not forcing anything more, alright? There's no need to be scared. We're just going to lay here."

"Don't you want to...?" Severus begun in a strange voice, but faltered when he glanced up briefly at James' face, and coloured considerably.

James' eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Don't I want to...what?"

When Severus merely attempted to hide his face in James' robes, he found his chin lifted firmly between a forefinger and thumb. Curious hazel eyes met his own.

"Hmm?" James insisted.

"I was just...I had a thought," Severus stammered, suddenly unsure of himself.

"Did you now?" James voice was tainted with amusement.

"Yes. I assumed you would... kiss me. You...You normally do and today, as of yet, you haven't."

Severus blushed furiously as James' face broke into slow, knowing grin. The truth was, James had been enjoying Severus company to such an extent that the furthering of the bet had not been at the front of his mind.

"You only have to ask," he murmured before lowering his head obligingly and bringing their lips together, failing in his determination not to enjoy the unique sensation more than he should.

It took a while, but Severus finally decided that he quite liked being cocooned in James strong arms, and not just for the kissing and gentle groping. They'd both parted, breathless and painfully aroused before they could get carried away.

Resting his head against a firm chest, and running a tongue across his swollen lips, Severus smiled to himself.

Breath cascaded across the top of Severus' head, ruffling his hair. Neither felt the need to speak, but merely settled into an embrace that was incredibly comfortable and natural for both of them, against the odds.

Severus enjoyed simply being held so closely, as it created the feeling of being protected and cared for. It was completely alien to him.

No one had ever held Severus like this before, and he marveled at the wonder this newfound emotion created inside of him. Strange, he mused, and somewhat uncomfortable in its novelty, but he was not about to complain. He'd experienced another very pleasant, albeit high charged evening, in James' company.

James' only realised that Severus had fallen asleep when his sleeve grew damp, and he was drawn from his own drowsiness. The smaller boy had dribbled on him. Shaking his head, and strangely only a little disgusted by this revelation, James edged himself backwards until Severus' dark head slipped gently onto the floor, supported by a pillow extracted from the couch beside them.

Getting painfully to his feet, James grabbed his coat, fully intending to make a quick escape.

However, as he straightened up, James only managed to push one arm into his jacket before he was distracted by the still form below him. Severus thin chest rose rhythmically. The boy's hands had wound themselves tightly into the rug, and his face had such a peaceful expression that James could not help but stare.

Only a tiny, intense frown remained on the smooth face, marring the picture of tranquility. Without really knowing why, James stopped down and placed a gentle kiss to the small impairment, with a sudden desire to make it disappear.

Severus twitched slightly, one eye opening blearily to connect with James' own. Their faces were very close together and it was only too clear for James to see, in Severus' sleepiness, that his

unguarded expression had revealed such a look of adoration and affection that he was momentarily overwhelmed.

For the first time, guilt welled in James' stomach as he thought of diminishing that contented look from one who wore it so rarely. He hadn't understood much about how seriously he was going to mess with someone so insecure as Severus, with what he was about to do, and suddenly hated himself for not stopping this bet before it had begun.

Severus was going to be hurt beyond repair and, for the first time, this fact was not disregard-able.

James shook his head slightly, cringing inwardly as he considered the thing which he'd once have gained much pleasure, had now come back to haunt him. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt Severus, as foolishly sentimental as it sounded, but that is exactly what he intended to do.

Strangely, the open innocence and calm, simple happiness on Severus' face brought a series of intimate, erotic images from meetings with Amy to James's mind, and he suddenly felt very sick

"Stay," Severus murmured, unclenching a hand to briefly touch James' wrist. "Please... it is not late."

Unaware of what he was asking for exactly, Severus stared up at the face inches from his own, knowing only that he didn't want the warmth and companionship James had so abruptly brought into his life, to disappear. Feeling this peaceful was like a drug. Bitterness and hate never gave him the satisfaction this did.

James swallowed, giving a small, indulgent smile and clasping Severus's wavering hand in his own, and placing a chaste kiss to it.

"It is. I can't stay tonight, love," he murmured, not having to fake the emotion in his voice, for it was already there. "I will see you tomorrow."

Severus' face fell but he did not argue. After persuasion from James, was coaxed back into sleep.

With a sigh, James stood, turning sharply towards the small entrance to the room and striding towards it, an incredibly heavy weight settling uncomfortably in his gut. Why was it that when he had a perfectly manicured, gorgeous girl in his arms, wanking him off, he could not feel such satisfaction as he did when simply holding Severus in his arms.

The very thought sent pleasant shivers down James' spine. Having sex with Severus would be like nothing he could imagine. The sheer awkwardness and intensity, when combined with their growing attraction to each other, and past hostility, would make it a unique experience, yet James could only wonder at it as a distant impossibility. It would never happen; Severus would never be ready in time, before it all had to end, and James would not force it upon him.

James almost turned back to enclose the frail, struggling boy in his arms, whom he barely knew. Recklessly, hopelessly, stupidly, he wanted to let himself fall for Severus completely. Amy's perfect face was not even recall-able when compared to the dark haired boy who was slowly captivating him in his own curious way.

Yet this acknowledgment of such forbidden emotion did not stop James from walking away from the dark, gloomy dungeons towards the blinding light of the entrance halls, and back towards Gryffindor Tower, with the full, determined intention to commit further acts of unfaithfulness. He couldn't care for someone so much and then deliberately hurt them so badly, it didn't make sense.

To prove to himself that Severus was no more than a brief distraction, James would have to

continue to sleep with Amy, despite the intense guilt that had slowly risen throughout the evening.

He and Severus had become friends, real friends, and James respected that.

James knew, all at once, that he was going to suffer just as much as Severus once this was over.

## Chapter 10

James' eyes drooped tiredly, as he guiltlessly allowed Professor Slughorn's voice wash over him without taking a word of it in. Slumped back in his chair, with Amy's hand resting casually on his thigh beneath the work bench, James surrendered himself to boredom. The potions class was as cold as ever. He had his collar pulled right up round his neck, and his hands deep inside the sleeve of his robes where they could retain a little warmth.

Casting his eyes about the room, James was not surprised to find only a scarce handful of students actually obediently copying down the notes that would aid them in their lengthy homework assignment. Severus, predictably, was among these. James snorted softly, a small smile on his face.

Beside him, Amy flicked back her hair and nudged his elbow.

"I can't wait until we get out of here," she murmured. "This is so dull. Just think of all the... productive things we could be doing, rather than this drivel. Potions is such a bore."

After a quick glance to check that Severus was occupied, James responded with a smirk, tilting his head so that his breath would be deliberately ghosting across her face as he spoke. "I agree," he whispered back, with a pointed look. "Meet you in the Owlery at break?"

"The Owlery?"

"Yeah...Why not? We've been... productive, just about everywhere else. Time for somewhere new, don't you think?"

With a muffled giggle, Amy agreed happily.

James didn't notice the figure waiting outside the classroom door until he'd pelted right into it. The boy cursed as he stumbled into the wall, twisting his ankle in the process. James expression tightened when he saw who it was.

"Severus..." he tutted softly to himself. He turned back to his friends, expression masked.

"Better watch Snivelly," he warned them. "I've heard he'll turn you into a rat if you step on him."

Amy, Steve and Jack snorted their amusement at his side. The rest of the class filed past, some lingering to observe the familiar entertaining display and others wandering on, far too used to James and Severus' disputes to remain particularly intrigued by them.

Severus winced at the harsh tone, as he stared up at the trio with fearful defiance, clutching his ankle.

James could tell the boy didn't know quite how to react to such a venomous comment, considering their secret relationship. Severus looked completely thrown, and equally as hurt. Before he could give them away to the gathering crowds, James turned to his friends and threw them a wink.

"You guys go on. I'll catch up. I just need to have a few firm words with Snapey here first."

Sharing knowing glances, the gang disappeared, along with a number of disappointed bystanders.

"Some things are just too wicked to be seen by innocent eyes," James called after them, before

turning slowly back to Severus. The Slytherin had staggered to his feet and was watching his partner with caution.

The unfriendly sneer quickly slid from James' face as they were left alone. He stepped forward, taking one of Severus' hands gently in his own and linking their fingers in an unexpectedly affectionate gesture.

"Hello, Severus," he smiled, a genuine warmth spreading through him. "Alright?"

Severus hesitated, eyeing James warily as if expecting him to revert to a cruel, unforgiving bully at any moment. It unnerved him when James switched characters so abruptly, and reminded him painfully of dark days he'd rather forget.

He offered a weak nod, but James, as always, saw straight through his insecurity.

With a gentle sigh, James raised Severus' chin with his free hand. "I'm sorry I shouted, but we have to pretend to be enemies, remember? Hogwarts isn't ready to know about us. We have to play it cool."

"I know," Severus agreed finally, with much reluctance. The whole point of his seduction of James was to get them to kiss in public, but it seemed they still had a way to go. All this outward show of bickering was necessary for the moment, he knew that, but all to often it frustrated him, and only served as a bitter reflection of the separation between himself and James, with regard to their social standing. "I just... It's foul to see you behave so..."

"So what?" James grimaced, dropping Severus' hand and watching him reproachfully. "Go on."

"Like a complete arse," Severus explained bitterly, noticing the absence of contact between them immediately. His voice quavered with the removal of confidence that had been supplied by such a simple gesture. "You are...better. I know you are. I don't know why you have to pretend insulting your peers is amusing."

James sighed, running a hand through his hair and taking it to greater heights of disarray. "Severus...we've been through this. I'm not perfect. You know that better than anyone. I'm an idiot. A complete idiot for acting the way I did. But I've moved on from the marauders, haven't I? You know I want to change, just...give me time. Give Hogwarts time. Me and you is what's most important."

Severus still looked highly doubtful. The James he saw in school, the popular, confident Gryffindor, was so hard to link with the same person that treated Severus with such respect and consideration behind closed doors.

"I'm sorry," James repeated, nudging Severus gently until his back was pressed to the wall. "It's you I want. I hate putting you down, you know that."

James pushed a strand of hair away from Severus' face and gave him a small smile. It was only then that he noticed Severus shifting awkwardly, his posture strange. James' grin grew wider.

"One day you will allow me to take care of that," he promised, glancing pointedly down at his boyfriend's tented trousers. Subtly, he gently squeezed with the hand he'd left resting on Severus' hip, before tracing it lightly across the material of the boy's school robes until it rested at a point just centimeters from his crotch.

Severus sucked in a shallow breath, watching James' movements with hooded eyes.

James swallowed thickly as he noticed the growing willingness in Severus' eyes, and silently vowed to follow through on this particular promise.

Severus shivered with anticipation and dread in equal measures, as an unknown thrill shot through him. Using James' distraction to his advantage, he forced some focus upon himself and made his own demands. "One day we'll show the whole school how we feel."

"It's a deal," James agreed, seeing no better time than now to prepare for the final stages of the bet. Stepping back, the cold air of the dungeons separated them once more, cooling his flushed cheeks. "Actually... how about we make a proper date to, you know, officially come out."

He hesitated for a moment, eyeing Severus thoughtfully and deliberately possessively. "You haven't already promised some other guy you'll go to the ball with him, at the end of term, have you?"

His feigned jealousy had the desired effect. A tinge of red crept onto Severus' cheeks with a flicker of bashful discomfort.

"Of course I haven't," he muttered, overwhelmed with the thought that James considered him a worthy date, and potentially sought after by others.

"Good," James grinned. "Then you'll be my date. We'll go together and I'll kiss you, all evening, as much as you like."

Severus eyes widened, momentarily unbalanced by James' immediate consent. His heart beating wildly in his chest, he nodded eagerly in agreement. Everything was finally falling into place.

With a final smirk, and an ominous weight of dread settling into his gut, James turned on his heel and slowly made his way up to the Owlery..

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The rest of the day passed quickly, for James, in a haze of boredom and confusing emotion he was attempting desperately to repress. Before he knew it, the castle had become blanketed by darkness and he was climbing into Severus' secret room in the depths of the dungeons.

As expected, Severus was looming over a cauldron, his face strained from concentration as he added the precise ingredients. Unconsciously, James' lips tilted into a small, affectionate smile at the boy's dedication.

He replaced the board behind him, and Severus glanced up, his face softening into rare contentment as he eyed the handsome form of his boyfriend. Severus had always known, on some distant level, that he was lonely, but his increased awareness of his desire for company had only been enhanced by his new relationship with James. Every time the Gryffindor stepped through that gap, exactly on time and enthusiastic of his friendship, while considerately undemanding, Severus felt a precious swell of warmth force a rare smile onto his face.

Silently, James wandered over and placed a delicate kiss on the side of Severus' neck, before flopping down on the couch to watch him work.

It was hard for Severus to remain focused when gorgeous, curious hazel eyes were tracing his every movement. James always had made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, whether it be due to pure fear, anger or something very different, and he'd yet to discover a cure for it.

His feelings towards the Gryffindor had altered dramatically over the past few weeks. He couldn't

say now, that he loathed James to the extend he had before. It had been dampened considerably.

Severus had managed to convince himself, with James' clever persuasion, that his boyfriend was merely misled. Sirius, Remus and Peter had obviously tainted him with their appreciation for cruelty and rule breaking. On his own, James was everything Severus had always wanted in a friend, and a lover. He drew him out of himself, and forced him from darkness and despair he'd dwelled in for so long. He was funny, curious and full of surprisingly complex characteristics. Severus did, against his better judgement, find James a brilliant, intriguing mind as well as beautiful physically. And James always seemed so interested in what he had to say, though Severus didn't know why.

He'd certainly not forgotten the reasons he'd hated James, and was still dedicated to his plan to humiliate him, but in rare peaceful moments like these, he became overwhelmed by sadness. Without James, he had nothing. A nobody. Meaningless. He was lonely. With James, he had the world.

"Your cauldrons on fire," James drawled, an amused glint in his eye as he watched the display.

With a start, Severus stepped sharply back, with a string of verbal profanities. Drawing his wand, he swiftly repaired all that he could.

"Smooth..." James grinned, getting gracefully to his feet to stare down, with Severus, at the destroyed potion. "You shouldn't allow yourself to get distracted, you know. Imagine if I'd actually been trying to get your attention."

Glowing beetroot, Severus mumbled something unintelligible, before stooping down to collect another set of ingredients to begin again.

"That was my homework," he grumbled, hair falling across his face as he chopped, grinded and stirred with frustration.

Sympathetically, James looped an arm round Severus waist and nuzzled his hair from behind. It was with great appreciation that he noted Severus had continued to keep himself relatively clean, as he had with their first date. In fact, he did not smell bad at all. There was no intoxicating perfume, or magical concealer, that James was used to from girlfriends, just a clean warmth. Severus' natural scent, a masculine scent, appealed to James' greatly and he wondered, as he had frequently over the past week or so, whether he was more attracted to males than females. It was a case worth debating.

"I haven't done mine yet either," James explained, pushing all inner conflict from his mind to focus on Severus. "If that makes you feel any better. How about we do it again together?"

Hesitantly leaning back against him, Severus felt a smile cast aside his scowl at James' offer, and agreed.

Severus was not a merciful teacher. James had not paid particular attention in lesson, therefore, he was relying on the other for instruction.

No matter if they were in a relationship, Severus tolerated no laziness or false ignorance, as he paid their work serious attention.

"Potions is an art," he kept saying. "It needs great care and attention. You have to focus on it, James. Let it consume your senses..."

James much preferred to watch Severus than his own dull cauldron. He didn't even know what it was they were concocting. Sweat dripped from Severus's brow, his pale face fierce and controlled,

his long, pale hands were working tirelessly... To James, much to his reluctance, it was quite a sight. He could almost overlook the fact that Severus' hair had gained its usual repulsive layer of grease, as the potions fumes infiltrated the strands

James wasn't surprised when he received top marks for his homework. His vial of perfect potion had an 'O' splashed across the front when he received it back, a proud Slughorn nodding appreciatively at him. Glancing across the classroom, James shared a proud smirk with Severus before turning back to his friends.

...

"What's your favourite colour?"

"My favourite what?"

"Colour, Severus," James grinned, running a hand casually through the dark hair that rested in his lap. "It's a simple question."

"No, it's an absurd question."

"How do you figure that?" James frowned. He'd simply been attempting to show interest in Severus' personality, but, as always with the Slytherin, things were made ten times more difficult than they needed to be. Not that he didn't find Severus' critical mind appealing, because he liked the boy's wit and strange, unique humour very much. Just, at times, it could grow frustrating when James was trying to bring them closer.

"What information are you attempting to derive from such a trivial inquiry? Surely you cannot!"

"Merlin, Severus, calm down. It was just a question. Relax."

Severus winced at the frustration in James' voice.

"Black."

"Pardon."

"My favourite colour," Severus muttered, glancing up at James through a curtain of hair. "I like black."

A smile edged its way onto James' face. "Predictable. Mine's red. And gold."

Severus smirked. "Predictable."

They soon found that asking mundane, inconsequential questions far more entertaining than expected. When James stealthily extracted a vial of veritaserum from his pocket, grinning wickedly, the responses became equally as surprisingly. A revealing amount of information, with regard to the other, was dropped conveniently at their disposal.

Later, however, James braved a deeper, darker question, knowing that this, if nothing else would bring Severus closer to him, and make the smaller boy depend and respect him, as he needed him to.

"Severus, tell me about your home life," James said quietly.

He felt Severus stiffen, before the boy sat up fully and stared at him, as though questioning his motives. When he found James to be serious, Severus soon realised he had no choice but to answer.

And truthfully.

"I..."

Feeling slightly guilty for pushing the matter, but stubborn all the same, James gave Severus the space he needed and waited patiently.

When Severus gave a small, intense frown, his face paling as he began to speak, James breathed out a small sigh of relief.

"I do not have a contented home life," Severus admitted, his voice low and dejected. "My father... He is a man I am loathe to accept blood ties. My mother is weak. I despise her. I despise them all, and they I."

James swallowed uncomfortably, picking up on the 'they' and 'T' situation. He'd expected something of the sort, but it was most depressing to learn that Severus was not just an outcast at school, but also in his own home.

"Do they argue? Are they...unhappy?"

Severus opened his mouth to answer, but his throat constricted and he settled for a short nod instead. Humiliatingly, his eyes burned and his body seized up as he was forced, for the first time, to speak of his unhappy childhood. He was sure James would be disgusted, and that he'd blown his chances, but the Gryffindor merely allowed him to talk and talk, like he hadn't before.

It was as though poison was dripping from Severus' mouth. Pent up anger and emotion that had been allowed to fester and turn into something truly ugly. And once he had started spewing it, he couldn't stop.

A lot later, James let out a slow breath, a deeply disturbed expression darkening his own features. A huge wave of sadness filled him, and suddenly, he hated himself. For the first time, James truly, bitterly regretted ever adding additional horrors to Severus' bleak life.

Severus was staring at him intently, almost daring. James had forced him into a dark corner, but he knew equally as certainly, that he had to draw him back out of it.

"Thank you," James said awkwardly, for he had no idea how to respond to such a dismal tale. "I wont tell a soul Severus. I swear."

Severus didn't even seem to be listening. His face was paler than usual, his mind far away.

James shook his head heavily and tugged a blanket down from the sofa and draped it round Severus' shoulders. He made to move, and begin his familiar trek up back to Gryffindor Tower, but an unexplainable weight kept him glued to the floor, unable to move. Relenting to failure, James allowed his mind to sway under the weight of his own guilt, as he desperately sought a means of escape from the trap he had so unknowingly set himself.

...

Severus woke, much to his surprise, encased in the circle of James' arms. He had not expected the Gryffindor to stay. There was always some rational, important reason for them to part at the end of the evening, but James had actually remained by his side all night, supplying some much needed comfort.

Never before had Severus released his anxieties in such a verbal fashion, as he had the previous

night. Where discomfort and embarrassment were an expected response on reflection, he could only feel immense relief, as though to have someone else know of his burden, even if they would never truly understand his pain themselves, was a weight lifted from his shoulders.

Severus maneuvered himself slightly so that he could see James' face without obstruction. Eyeing the Gryffindor's near-perfect complexion, Severus envied the freshness and appeal James could retain during the night. No matter what Severus looked like the night before, he would be a bleary eyed mess by the morning.

With this depressing thought, Severus remembered the vital factor of hygiene Lily had taught him.

Severus struggled from James grip and stumbled towards the bathroom in search of toothpaste, swearing as he knocked his foot on the edge of the sofa.

James raised his head sleepily at the sound, and laughed softly when he saw Severus hopping on one foot in obvious pain.

"A simple 'good morning' would have done, Severus," he grinned, stretching widely. "You didn't have to make all that racket to wake me up."

When Severus merely glared, revealing that he really was in pain, James got groggily to his feet and dragged them to the bathroom to survey any damage.

Severus protested adamantly when James slipped his sock from his foot, surprisingly gently, and tipped him backwards so that his knees knocked against the toilet seat, and he was forced to sit down.

James leant back on his heels with a sigh, relenting to Severus' lack of co-operation.

"You're so stubborn, you know that," he remarked lightly, a small frown on his face. "Is your foot definitely ok?"

"Fine," Severus nodded, flexing his toes to demonstrate his flexibility. "I merely stubbed it."

Before Severus could protest any further, James tapped the foot with his wand to administer a simple healing spell.

With a slightly crinkled nose, and a partially concealed grimace, he straightened up a few moments later and frowned.

"You haven't brushed your teeth yet have you?" he asked innocently.

Severus growled in frustration and forced James bodily from the room.

...

Eating breakfast with Severus, in such a domestic setting, was a strange, though not wholly displeasing experience. Their now ability to converse without awkward, long silences and frequent argument was rewarding, and James reluctantly enjoyed it very much, as did his partner.

As neither had the desire to depart for the Great Hall, they ate through the remarkable amount of cereals Severus kept in his hide-out. Though out of date and suspicious in colour, with their combined magic, the food was quite edible.

It was as they stood side by side, washing up in the muggle fashion Severus was so keen on, that

the fact of their unexpected, true compatibility began to unnerve James. The fact that they really would work well together, and that they could, potentially, be very good for each other and actually make each other happy, not just in relation to furthering the bet, but in general, was not something he wanted to acknowledge.

After a quick goodbye, James hurried back towards his own dormitory, unable to delay returning any longer. He almost collided with Remus, as he reached the Entrance Hall.

"James!" he cried, visibly relaxing on sight of his friend. "Where the hell have you been? You could have said if you were going to stay out. Sirius has been going crazy-"

"I'm fine," James assured him, taking Remus' elbow and leading them up the stairs. "I just had some things to sort out."

"With Snape?"

James nodded.

"We thought that would be it," Remus explained. "That's why we covered for you, without calling McGonagall and creating mass panic. It was close though."

"I'm sorry, Remus. Thanks," James replied gratefully. "Come on, let's-"

"No," Remus said suddenly. "I almost forgot. I came to find you. The headmaster wants to see you in his office. As soon as you were available, he said."

James frowned, then swallowed. "You don't think he knows..."

Remus shrugged, looking equally as fearful. "Only one way to find out."

## Chapter 11

It took a few failed attempts for James to finally draw up the courage to knock on the headmaster's office door. Blood pounded in his ears, sweat pooling at his palms. He tried everything to convince himself of the older man's ignorance. He couldn't know. There was no way. He just couldn't-

James sucked in a breath as the door before him was pulled open, revealing an aged, gently smiling face. Something in Dumbledore's twinkling eyes gave James the feeling the man knew he'd been standing outside, fearfully, for quite some time without making his presence known.

If the bet had indeed been discovered, there'd be an immediate expulsion, James had no doubt. And not just him. Remus, Sirius and probably Peter too. Severus was the only innocent participant in this whole deal.

James' stomach lurched uncomfortably as he pictured Severus' face when he was told the truth... It would be disbelieving, unforgiving, angry, bitter... James shuddered, wincing against the inevitable. Severus would never trust again after such a betrayal.

Pushing his fringe from his eyes, James looked up at Dumbledore with all the confidence he could muster in the circumstances.

"Good morning, sir."

"Hello, James," Dumbledore greeted him, his face surprisingly open and lacking the overwhelming disappointment James had been preparing for. "Do come in, my boy."

With a brief nod, James stepped past the headmaster, hands deep in his pockets and his face carefully blank. Dumbledore closed the door behind him without another word. He placed himself behind his desk, motioning for James to take the position directly opposite him.

With much reluctance, James complied. For a long moment, there was merely silence. James stared defiantly at the floor, his mind a whir of confusion, as Dumbledore eyed his student intently.

"You appear troubled," he said finally, absently running a hand through his beard. "I must ask you, James... Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

James glanced up innocently. "I don't think so, sir," he replied easily, feigning surprise. "Should there be?"

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose a fraction as he gave a small sigh. "Perhaps wish was the wrong term to have used... Tell me this, Mr. Potter, is there anything you think, perhaps, you should tell me."

James swallowed, his heart sinking in resignation. The knowing look in Dumbledore's eyes was unmistakable.

"If you're talking about the last quidditch match, sir...I know I elbowed that Slytherin beater in the ribs, but that catch I made at the end, for the snitch, was pretty amazing-"

Dumbledore held up a hand for silence, a brief flicker of amusement crossing his face before sincerity settled in once more.

James stuttered to a halt. His eyes, once again, dropped to the floor and all of his familiar, characteristic confidence dwindled into nothingness under the piercing gaze of his professor.

"I did not call this meeting to discuss quidditch," Dumbledore spoke softly, a hint of wistfulness in his tone. "No, James. You and I both have a much more serious matter in mind. For my part, I shall admit a large area of hazy confusion, a result, I'm afraid, of simple lack of knowledge. I am acting on a whim, James, I shall not delude you. What I am suggesting by this meeting, is that you use the opportunity to...confess your sins."

"Confess my sins?" James muttered, a dark look falling across his features, despite his best efforts to control his discomfort. Before he could stop himself, he'd added, "which one?"

With a gentle smile, Dumbledore leaned forward. "Failures are a part of us, James. Mistakes are common within mankind. I certainly would not be sitting in this chair, had I not stepped briefly upon the wrong path...on occasion."

"Are you condoning misbehaviour, sir?" James frowned. "If you know what I've done..." He grimaced, sealing his lips firmly against any further torn truths.

A tiny wince creased the corners of Dumbledore's eyes, at James' confession, as though he was reluctant for his suspicions to be proved correct on this particular occasion.

"I am not condoning anything, my boy, but merely suggesting a light at the end of the tunnel. Mistakes are reversible, if only we grasp the opportunity while we can."

Silence settled between them once more. It seemed as though Dumbledore had some mercy, because he trained his eyes to admire the view from his window, and released James from his stare. He'd begun to hum gently.

James knew the man was waiting.

...

"Severus!"

Lily jogged athletically down the corridor, falling into step beside her Slytherin friend.

"How are you?" she breathed. "I haven't seen you for ages. Where have you been hiding?"

Severus shrugged, his dark eyes softening briefly in affection as he absorbed the rich colours of her hair and brightness of her smile. He supposed it had been a while since they'd spoken properly, but then he had been rather distracted lately.

"Homework," he muttered, as if this explained everything, and watched as Lily nod suspiciously.

"Good... Just checking you haven't been avoiding me."

"I would not-"

"I know, I know," she waved a hand dismissively. "It's just...I miss your company when you're not around, Sev. There's no one to make snarky comments and portray to me, in their own unique way, their dark, ironic perspective of the world."

Severus snorted, uncomfortable with the deep affection in her confession. They both knew he would make no similar speech of his own in response, however much he returned the sentiments.

When they reached the end of the corridor, Lily stopped them, turning to regard her friend closely. "I've missed you, Severus Snape. I really have."

"And I, you," Severus responded immediately. His mouth twitched awkwardly into a small smile, before he cleared his throat and turned to the window beside them, gazing out across the grounds with a pensive expression.

He heard Lily sigh and do the same. Covertly, he glanced at her through a curtain of her. Lily was looking exceptionally beautiful today, or perhaps he was only noting it because he hadn't studied her closely in quite a while.

Lily pushed the window open and sat delicately on the ledge, her hair breezing across her shoulders and sending a familiar, floral scent to Severus' nostrils. He shut his eyes.

Severus' love for Lily had paled considerably with his newfound emotion for the Gryffindor star, though the memory of his unspoken rejection from any romantic connection with the girl would always be a sore point. If she had accepted him, Severus may not be in his current dilemma.

It was in that moment that Severus realised, if he was not extremely careful, James would win all rights to his heart and there would be no reversal.

Lily nudged his arm playfully, knocking him from his reverie. "Hey, not thinking about that girl still are you? I've seen that little smirk you've been wearing recently, as if you know something the rest of us don't. Are you two finally a couple?"

A faint flush coloured Severus' cheeks. He cast Lily a stubborn frown.

"Sorry," she smiled apologetically. "I understand if it's still a sensitive topic. I'm just glad you're...content. I know you two must quarrel. I see you sometimes...and you seem upset. Angry even, and then the brightness if back. You can always talk to me you know. I'm here."

Severus nodded stiffly, suddenly weary of her company and wondering what James had chosen to fill his day. Provoking questions only made him uncomfortable and talking had never been his strong point.

He made to bid her farewell, restless and suddenly anxious, but Lily had clutched to his arm, a hesitant expression creasing her face into one of concern.

"Severus...if you wouldn't mind...I..."

He rose an eyebrow in query. "What is it?"

Lily sighed, running a hand through her long hair. "You know you shared all your relationship problems, question and stuff with me?"

Severus nodded warily.

"Well, how would you feel if I wanted to...share something with you...before I told anyone else." She paused here, to gage Severus' reaction, nervous despite herself.

"What is it?" he repeated, a little more urgency to his tone now.

"Well," Lily began, a strange excitement flitting through her face, which gave Severus the impression she would explode with this secret knowledge whether he desired to hear it or not. "I think, against my better judgment I have come to...like someone. A boy. Very much."

Severus quickly hid his surprise, a familiar jealousy creeping up his spine and taking him off guard. He cleared his throat, neutralising his expression into one of mere curiosity.

"And does he hold...similar feeling for you in return?" A pointless question, Severus knew. There was no boy in school who would deny Lily Evans. She was beautiful, pure, friendly...She was perfect.

"Oh yes, definitely," Lily beamed. "He's made it very clear. It's just...he's not exactly the most appropriate choice for a boyfriend."

Severus' eyes narrowed marginally as he turned his back on the window, crossing his arms as he leaned back and presenting her with his full attention. "How so?"

Lily winced. "Sev, you have to understand, I've hated this guy for ages. He's a jerk really. But recently...he's changed. I asked him for a favour and, as far as I know, he hasn't broken his word. I've always been attracted to him, physically at least. Now I think he's really matured. I'm running out of reasons to keep saying no. I think now is the time to see if what I feel...and what he obviously feels...can be...something. Do you know what I mean?"

Severus felt his chest constrict, a flicker of dawning realisation causing a wave of nausea to consume him.

"Who is this boy?"

"Sev-"

"Tell me his name," Severus demanded shakily, internally begging that he had not just gained the one competitor for a certain Gryffindor's affections that he could not possibly compete with.

"Oh, Sev. It's...It's James Potter."

...

"Let me confess this..." Dumbledore murmured, hoping to prod the determinedly silent boy along, "Lily Evans paid me a brief, unexpected visit this morning with a series of concerns."

James looked up sharply. "Wait...This is about Lily?"

With regret, Dumbledore shook his head gently. "No. She plays a part in my...confusion, yes, though the debate does not centre around her."

There was silence once again. James could feel it thickening by the second and knew he'd not be able to hold out much longer.

"Severus Snape."

The name broke the silence, spoken by the headmaster, almost absently, though with a deliberate firmness that proved unmistakable. James's reaction was immediate. His face contorted into a pained expression, his cheeks flushing subtly with obvious discomfort. He swallowed sharply as his eyes met Dumbledore's.

"I thought as much..." Dumbledore murmured. "Sorry, my boy, but I was sure that particular name would cause a reaction. The reaction I feared, if I am honest."

And there it was. The disappointment. James' Gryffindor bravery took a back seat as shame filled him. He could no longer look the headmaster in the eye. It was one thing to admit he'd done wrong to himself, and even to his friends, but for Dumbledore to imply it with this much weight really brought the truth home.

"Evans told you," James muttered darkly. "She found out...somehow, and she told you." James bit back a curse, feeling a sudden wave of dislike towards the pretty redhead whom he'd held his heart safe for, for so long.

"Lily Evans has not spoken a word, for the simple reason that she does not know. It was through close observation of our Mr. Snape that I came to my own conclusions."

James shook his head, almost in disbelief, and groaned quietly.

"Shall I pack my bags?"

"Your bags?"

"Yeah. You're expelling me, right? When do you wan-"

"I'd thought, James, that with the current circumstances you'd be far more concerned with ensuring Severus' welfare, than preparing to leave at the drop of a hat."

For the first time, there was a hint of anger in the headmaster's tone. His gaze was stern.

"Leaving now will not aid Severus, or yourself," he explained. "This matter must be dealt with delicately. I can form a solution, James, to ensure as little pain as possible. But first, you must tell me everything."

"What did Evans tell you?"

Dumbledore sighed. "She is merely worried for her friend, James. Severus' behaviour, as of late, had been...erratic, inconsistent... One moment he appears quite content, and unlike himself, and the next he is questioning his own personal worth, inflicting self-harm and unsettling himself into such...intense confusion that one is left questioning his sanity."

"And naturally Lily pointed the finger at me?"

"No, James. That was I."

"Oh."

"My boy, I am not here to make accusations, but I do need the truth. I managed to placate Lily fairly sufficiently. I promised her that I would keep an eye out for her friend, and I have done as such. I think sometimes you forget, James, what one is able to see from a staff's perspective. As much as you may think it, your actions with Severus have hardly been subtle."

James rubbed a hand across his face, silently cursing. He was pushed into a corner. It was his own stupid fault. He'd have to confess everything.

"I don't have a choice do I?"

"I am afraid not."

A short while later, James had told Dumbledore the majority of what he'd done. Various details, such as the extent of firewhiskey they'd consumed, where they'd purchased it, and who from, had been tactfully missed out, but the unbreakable vow component was a vital factor James felt he had to include.

"And Remus Lupin cast this spell you say?" Dumbledore responded finally, his eyes trained on James' face. The truth had obviously been worse than he'd expected. "I admit, I was oblivious to

this unexpected complication. I knew that you had manipulated Severus in some way, and I expected your intentions false but this..."

James nodded, in complete agreement with Dumbledore's distaste. "Sir, I'm so sorry!"

"What were the exact terms of the agreement?"

A brief look of confusion creased James' face as he thought carefully. "I was to get Severus to fall for me, so that I could..." Flushing with regret, James looked down at his lap. He did not need to add the rest, as Dumbledore had suspected as much already.

"I believe the key part of that sentence was 'so that,'" Dumbledore said thoughtfully, not forcing James to elaborate. "I am prepared to limit your punishment, James, if 'so that' is eliminated."

"What do you mean? I don't have to... hurt him?"

"Does the idea appeal to you?"

James shook his head thoroughly. "No," he whispered. "Not anymore."

"And does Severus love you?"

"I...I don't know."

"Well then, my boy, I suggest you find out. I assume I do not need to express my concerns that, if you are to bring extreme harm upon Severus Snape, the effect will prove detrimental. He depends on you a great deal. I have no doubt that, if you continue this...plan of yours, to seduce him, which I fear you must, you shall succeed. However, instead of, as you suggested, humiliating him and destroying any sense of self-worth that he has attained in your company, you must let him down gently. Lie if you must. If you do not want him, you must portray it."

James' throat was dry. "Sir I...I don't...I can't..." Couldn't what? Couldn't not humiliate him? Couldn't let him go? Couldn't possibly keep him? James placed his head in his hands. "I'm an idiot," he muttered, barely audibly. "A prize idiot." He'd meant to hurt Severus, right from the start, whether he wanted to or not. Never had he counted on destroying himself in the process.

A wrinkly hand was placed firmly on James' shoulder and he glanced up. Compassion lingered among the depths of disappointment in the headmaster's gaze.

"You must finish what you have started. There is no way to eliminate an unbreakable vow, James, for the very fact that it is unbreakable. I highly doubt the spell attempted succeeded in its entirety, but that does not eliminate the danger."

The heaviness in James' expression was not lost on the headmaster, but it was not his place to encourage James further into the tangled mess he had condemned himself. The boy needed to come to terms with his emotions in his own time. Dumbledore was no more immune to the looks that Severus gave James, to the ones James relayed to Severus, when he thought no one was watching.

"Professor..." James said finally, a deep sigh wracking through his body. "I never meant for it to go this far... It was a prank... a stupid prank."

"It is 'stupid' pranks, James, that destroy lives, crumble self-esteem and push boys such as Severus Snape into dark corners I would rather he were not..."

James nodded numbly. "What do I have to do professor?"

"End this," Dumbledore answered solemnly "end this madness... this obsession with tormenting the poor child. Severus is more delicate than you may realise. I have reasons to fear any further deep trauma on his life could be truly... life shattering. And James..." he added seriously, "do ensure you learn from this. I doubt you wish to remain a bully for your entire life?"

James swallowed, shaking his head. He managed a weak smile as he got to his feet, feeling as though he should say more, apologise more profusely and promise dramatic action to counteract his deceit, but found his throat too constricted to speak. Feeling rather sick, he hurried to the door, Dumbledore's gaze burning into his back. Without looking back, he jogged down the spiraling staircase to get away as quickly as possible.

James paused in his swift progress when he made out two familiar figures, leant against the window at the end of the corridor. His attempt to go unnoticed failed and the unlikely friends turned to look at him. Both wore anxious expressions, as though they'd been discussing something very serious before his arrival.

"Evans," he nodded in greeting. Turning to Severus, he felt his stomach clench and issued a similar, formal greeting.

"You ok, Potter?" Lily asked, eyes narrowed in concern. "You look... upset."

"I'm fine," James assured her, more curtly than he'd intended. He took a deep breath, smoothing his face out best he could and forced a smile.

"What are you two up to then? Not having a secret affair are you?" he joked, perhaps unwisely so as Severus flushed a deep red, shifting sideways from Lily and dropping his gaze to the floor.

Neither laughed. The tension between them quickly became overbearing and James got the feeling he'd missed something.

"What's the matter? What's happened?" he asked sharply, turning his gaze between the two. Taking a closer look at Severus, he realised there was more to the boy's mood than simple embarrassment.

Severus opened his mouth, as though to respond but closed it again with a glance at Lily. With a visible swallow, he fixed his eyes on his lover's face, with an expression James could not quite decipher, though it disconcerted him greatly.

Ignoring Lily for a moment, James stepped forward. There was clearly something weighing on both their minds, but James barely gave thought to the fact that Severus' anxiety caused him greater upset than Lily's, when not so long ago this would've been reversed. "Severus..."

A small choking sound issued from the back of Severus' throat and he took off down the corridor, disappearing before he could be called back.

James blinked, confused. Lily looked apprehensive when he turned back to her, demanding an answer.

"Why did you call him Severus?" she asked curiously. "What are-"

"What have you done to upset him?" James returned, a possessive anger in his voice that he hadn't intended.

It was only then that James realised Lily was nervous. There was a flush to her cheeks and a look in her eye he was only too familiar with. Well distracted, James felt his heartbeat increase dramatically as she took a few deliberate steps towards him. Backed up against the wall, he was

helpless to the determination in her eyes that implied far more than simple friendly intention.

"I think it was something to do with...this," she answered softly.

'This' soon became very apparent. After years of dreaming... She was all he'd ever wanted. Lily Evans. Ever since that first day on the train. James' world narrowed to the green of her eyes and the soft, fullness of her lips, all thoughts of the errant Slytherin forced from his mind as Lily dominated his vision.

Before he could fathom a response, or even gather his thoughts, Lily's face grew so close it was but a blur and those tantalizing, perfect lips he'd devoted to memory, closed over his own.

## Chapter 12

Severus strode from one end of his room to the other, muttering profanities under his breath and biting back bitter tears of undeniable misery. The merciless clock on the wall reminded him constantly of James' tardiness.

James had seen he was upset... They'd looked into each other's eyes. But then Lily had been there... Everyone in the whole school knew how James Potter felt about Lily Evans. They were the perfect couple, just waiting to happen.

Severus let out a shaky sigh, his whole body sagging in anguish and weary resignation. He'd lost him. After all his work, and all they'd been through...It hadn't been enough. He was a fool to think it ever would be.

This was exactly what Severus had been dreading.

Eyes wild with fury and repressed grief, he stalked to his bathroom and snatched his razor from the sink. He sank down onto the couch, flipping the blade through his hands and contemplating the worthiness of his life.

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Lily's eyes widened in surprise, her cheeks flushed and her breathing heavy.

"James?" she asked tentatively, reading correctly the hesitation in his eyes. "What's the matter? Why did you stop?"

James let out a deep breath, detaching himself fully from the girl of his dreams in order to keep a clear head. "Lily, I-"

"Oh god," she groaned, a hand coming to cover her mouth. "You don't want me, do you? All this time...It was a joke? I thought-"

"No, no," James was quick to placate her. Resting his palms on her shoulders, he gently pressed her back until her knees hit the window sill and she sat. "It's not like that... I do want you. Or at least I did. I don't know...Fuck."

Lily winced, confused. Finally, with a sigh, she grabbed James' wrists to entwine their fingers. "Pot...James, I...I'm sorry. The last thing I want is confuse you. I shouldn't have been so forward. I just assumed this is what you wanted. You've always-"

James shut her up with a kiss. Years of pent up desire, of being constantly denied again and again, warranted some sort of release. He could not help himself. For a few, joyous moments, he allowed himself what he'd always wanted, and pushed Severus from his mind to simply enjoy this opportunity while he had it.

Their tongues dueled mercilessly, hands groped and hips pressed together. Snogging a willing Lily Evans was everything James had ever imagined, and so much more.

She was pliable where Severus was always rigid. She was enthusiastic where he was cautious. She was soft and warm, where he was hard, cold and chapped. She fought with him, matched his confidence, stroke for stroke, where Severus recoiled and submitted almost immediately. She tasted of fruit, of everything gloriously sweet, where Severus was a mix of the unknown. Lily gave

as much as she took, where Severus clung fearfully, always apprehensive, with no natural impulse to return the pleasure he was receiving, but soaked it up like a man dying of thirst.

There was no denying which James preferred. Which he needed.

Lily broke away for air, resting her head on James' chest and looping an arm round his middle to hold him still. "I'm too late, aren't I?"

James sighed, his gaze drifting to the ceiling as he absently shook his head, desperately frustrated. "Lily, I can't explain..."

"Try," she pleaded, emerald eyes shimmering with unshed tears at the thought of potential rejection. "You owe me that at least, James Potter. You've chased me for so long. And here I am. Finally giving myself to you. And you're hesitating."

James gave her a small, affectionate smile and nodded in reluctant agreement. Pulling him down to sit beside her, Lily's curious gaze never left his face.

"I never pretended to like you, Lily," James explained finally. "I've always liked you. A lot. More than I've ever liked anyone. I've very much fancied myself... in love with you. But I know I've never deserved you. My pathetic attempts at impressing you are a clear reflection at that. Half-hearted. Hopeless."

"James..." Lily begun, shifting closer, but James cut her off, worried that if he let her in too far, he would not be able to do the right thing. He owed her honesty, if nothing else.

"And maybe you had a point. Maybe I'm not good enough. All the times I was with other girls, I always held back a part of myself. The biggest part. My heart. I was saving it for you. For the day you finally saw sense and accepted me into your perfect little world. But now, I-I don't know what I want. There's someone in my life at the moment, who takes up most of my time. They are...very important to me. It would be...complicated to be in a relationship, romantically, when I held such...intense feeling for them."

Lily's hands slowly slipped from James' sweaty grasp.

"Oh god..."

"Don't be upset," James begged. "Please, Lily. I've just confessed that you're all I've ever wanted-"

"But that's not enough is it?"

"That's not what I'm saying-"

"Well what are you saying? Do you want me to wait? Is this other person really that important?"

Lily tightened her lips, preventing herself from rudely assuming. "I'm sorry," she sighed, pushing back her long hair. "I didn't mean that. You have every right to a relationship, whether it be with me or anyone else."

James shook his head, as if bewildered at his own actions. A frown creased his forehead as he rapidly came to a final decision. The most agonizing part was his own heart's clear message of what it wanted, and not just his mind's rationality that focused on the bet he'd yet to fulfill.

Tentatively, Lily rested her head on James' shoulder and they sat silently for a while.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me who this girl is?" Lily sighed finally. "You won't tell me her name?"

James' silence was answer enough.

Lily pulled back to look at him, tracing the creases around his eyes with a soft finger. "James, why are you doing this if it hurts so much? What could be more important than... giving us a future?"

James swallowed. "Atonement."

He suddenly wanted to tell her everything, from the stupid bet, to the guilt and the pressure... He wanted to explain that it wasn't by choice he'd spent evening after evening in Severus' company... listening to him talk... watching him work... delving into his past... pulling the boy, bit by bit, out of his shell... His own reckless heart that had betrayed him, catapulting him onto a path of no return, where Severus held all of the cards.

"Where does this leave us then?" Lily asked softly, a hint of desperation to her voice now. "I...I want you. I know you want me. I can see it in your eyes. I could make you happy. I know I could. We're meant for each other, James. Fate's just been waiting for you to grow up and mature, and me to come to my senses and stop being so stubborn."

"I know," James agreed quietly. This was the hardest thing he had ever done. Looking into Lily's puzzled face, he saw their children. They would have three. His hair, her eyes. They would undoubtedly be Gryffindor's. All of them. They would wreck havoc on Hogwarts.

James smiled distantly, raising a shaky hand to brush a stray hair behind Lily's ear. They would live in the country. They would fight, side by side, for the side of light. But most of all, they would be happy. Undeniably, selfishly, always happy.

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

James leaned in, brushing aside Lily's tears with the pad of his thumb as the perfect, idealistic future slowly slipped out of focus. "I'm so sorry," he murmured truthfully.

He could not betray Dumbledore. He could not lose Severus to the darkness. If he did, he'd never be the man Lily wanted him to be anyway.

James ripped himself away before he could lose sight of himself, detangling Lily's arms from about his neck and striding down the corridor, walking away from his dream. Throwing open the main doors he marched through the courtyard, barely noticing the tears that dampened his face or the aged man who stood in the shadows, a similar distress lurking behind half-moon spectacles.

...

Severus paused, mid rant, as he raised his head to find James standing in his doorway, wet hair plastered to his face and soaked through.

"Sorry I'm late," James grinned wryly, shrugging the rain from his shoulders. "I...fancied a walk. And it's raining outside..."

Severus tensed, watching cautiously as James walked slowly across the room.

Bowing his head, Severus swallowed deeply and waited for the inevitable. He wondered how James would proceed. Would he apologise before dumping him? Would he ask for one

last...session together? Would he be angry? Or perhaps suitably embarrassed that he'd ever entertained the idea of a relationship with the likes of him?

Severus' own fury broke free of his weariness, as he acknowledged the power he had unwittingly given James; the power to hurt him like never before. Their positions were supposed to be reversed. James should be the one cowering, while he administered the humiliating truths.

Glancing up with stubborn defiance, a dark cloud of self-loathing narrowing his vision, the last thing Severus expected was James to appear relaxed, his eyes holding a familiar warmth.

Reluctant curiosity caused the razor to slip from Severus' hands, where he pushed it behind a cushion, inconspicuously, to await James' next move.

It was only then that he realised the Gryffindor was obviously in emotional pain, or at least had been. His smile could not quite conceal the depths of loss and confusion that made his hazel eyes project such rare vulnerability.

"Come here?" James asked softly.

Severus's frown was deep on his face, but he complied, sitting himself beside the Gryffindor.

"Merlin, Severus..." James murmured, more to himself. "What have you done to me?"

Without any further warning, he cradled Severus' face with shaking hands and leveled their lips, inching their faces together, so that he could kiss him with agonizing slowness, in a way he never had before. A wet tongue slipped between Severus' motionless mouth, attacking with a subdued passion.

Severus would never know the forgiveness James was asking for with his body, lacking the courage to confess to the Slytherin in words, the awful deeds which he had done. It was a great weight from James' shoulders to know that, despite his previous intentions, his unfaithfulness would be no more. He had made his choice and would ensure in future, to the best of his abilities, that Severus never again suffer because of him.

Severus felt completely torn as James kissed him deeply, considerately, and with such affection. Surely people with intention to break up did not kiss their partner's this way?

Confused, Severus retreated back, unable to take it any longer. His palms rested against the damp fabric of James' robes, as he searched the Gryffindor's face, unwilling to measure the depths of his own despair.

"I hate you," Severus whispered harshly, the words falling from him of their own accord. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you..."

James sighed deeply, arms tight on Severus' shoulders.

"I know," he answered quietly. "I know that, Severus."

For once it seemed, James was to be the one also unhinged. He could not even look Severus in the eye. The kiss had reaffirmed everything he'd already known. Never perfect, always messy and too intense and restrained to wrought any single emotion.

"What are you doing here?" Severus planned to demand a response, but his voice allowed him only a murmur of volume. Shifting himself deliberately away from the circle of James' arms, a deeply bitter expression adorned his features as he waited for a response.

"What do you think I'm doing?" James replied, growing irritated. "Seeing you. You are my boyfriend."

"Was," Severus retorted.

"Am," James replied firmly. "I'm not going to leave you for Lily Evans."

Severus' head shot up. "What?"

James gave a small snort, rising to his feet with an unsteady breath. He looked down at Severus with a frown. "I, James Potter. Am. Not. Leaving. You. Not now. So stop avoiding me, stop wriggling out of my arms with your pathetic excuses, because I've had just about enough of it. I'm keeping you for the moment Severus Snape so get used to it."

The first kiss Severus had ever initiated himself was no disappointment. James blinked in shock as Severus pulled him roughly back down beside him. He found his knees weaken from beneath him, as the Slytherin attacked his mouth with all the limited skill he had learned over the past few weeks.

As much as James hated to admit it, Severus taking control, and claiming him so possessively, brought a thrill of its own. Closing his eyes, he surrendered himself to the Severus' passion. It was all teeth and way too much tongue. There was no finesse. No control. James could taste coppery blood in his mouth. Severus' hands clamped so hard to his sides that it would definitely leave bruises. Everything about it was Severus. A when the boy had, somehow weaved a path dangerously close to his heart, James could not help but enjoy the intimacy of it.

"I think you may need some more practice," James breathed when they finally pulled apart, flushed faced. "I never taught you to kiss like that."

"So arrogant, Potter," Severus reprimanded softly, too tense to register any embarrassment. "You know how I despise it."

Lifting his lips into a gentle smile, James felt as though he'd just crossed the finish line of a very, very long race. Breathing out, he closed his slowly and buried his face in the crook of Severus' neck, feeling an odd surge of affection and despair for this boy, who'd managed so successfully to turn his entire life upside down, rearranging his list of priorities until he, the cunning Slytherin, had seated himself very comfortably at the top.

"What?" Severus frowned when James moved back to observe his face closely.

"Nothing...Well, it's just...You've really come into your own, Severus Snape," James complimented lightly. "When we first started talking, you could barely hold your own in a conversation. Now you're practically molesting me. Who knows where we'll be in a few years time."

Severus stared, his dormant heart swelling painfully. Years... Could he really fathom another month, yet alone his remaining school years in James' company? That was never the plan..

After all of his careful constructing, his time and effort, the revelation that James' true affections were more than a passing interest, had Severus throwing any idea of revenge out of the window. In humiliating James Potter, he'd been searching for pleasure. Revenge would have done this. Now, his tactics needed altering. The thing now that would make Severus most happy, was James, in his whole form, for him to keep. He saw no reason to disrupt this, when life without the Gryffindor seemed so much bleaker.

Severus was dizzy and confused. This had got too far out of control. He'd meant to destroy the

boy... not become so attached.

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"James," Severus whispered some time later, sprawled beside James on his Slytherin emblazoned couch.

"Hmm?" James opened one eye.

"Tell me what happened."

James sighed, twisting onto his side. He didn't need to ask what Severus was referring to. "We've been over this..."

"No," Severus argued, ignoring the suggestion of James' hand, tracing circles on his prominent hip bone through the material of his trousers. "Lily told me."

Attention successfully gained, James' eyes snapped to Severus' face. "Told you what?"

Severus gave a minimal shrug, a newfound possessiveness making conversation about James' past love interests difficult. He wanted to be the only one occupying the Gryffindor's thoughts. He realised, even if he did have James for an indefinite period, there would always be competition. He just needed to know whether Lily remained one of these.

"Listen, Sev," James sighed, raising his straying hand to clasp Severus' bony wrist in his fingers. "I don't want to think about Lily anymore. I won't lie, I liked her for some time. But that was until I met you and we started...this." He gestured between them, smiling faintly. "Since then, I've changed, and more than I realise yet, I think. I want to concentrate on us. Lily may have developed feelings for me, and had she come to me a month ago, I would've welcomed her. But I know what I want. And even if this doesn't work out, I've made the right decision. My loyalty lies with you."

After coming to a firm decision as to what he must do, James did not feel the overwhelming regret and sense of loss as bitterly as he had on first reflection. He'd thrown away a peaceful future with Lily Evans, the most beautiful person he'd ever known, to tie himself to a grouchy, insecure Slytherin... all so he wouldn't have to hurt him. And his heart was not broken.

Severus had to love him by the time of the Ball. He had to at least keep this going until then. The unbreakable vow didn't demand he humiliate Severus. After the ball was over, and he was completely free to act how he wanted, then he'd analyse all of this... now he just wanted to block the whole thing out and selfishly enjoy Severus' unique company.

"I hardly believe that I am an appropriate replacement," Severus muttered, unable to see the rationality in James' explanation.

James snorted. "Then what am I doing here, laying with you, in the basement of Hogwarts, when I could be up there, planning my future with her?"

When Severus was unable to produce an answer, James repeated, "I'm yours, Severus. I can't make promises on the future. Neither of us can. But I'm not done dating you yet."

"If you feel guilty..."

"Ugh," James groaned. "I do. Horrendously. But that's not why I'm doing this. Something tells me I should. Something deep in here," James patted to his chest. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No."

"Then shut up."

Kissing the boy's pale cheek fondly, James allowed Severus to curl around him, as though unwilling to break contact after believing their relationship lost.

"I never took you for a hugger, Severus Snape," he commented lightly with amusement, a few moments later. It should feel wrong, yet all James could focus on was the warmth of Severus' side, the blackness of his eyes as they stared at him with such intensity.

Severus snorted. "You never know what you may like until you try it."

"True," James agreed.

"I suppose I should.. thank you," Severus continued.

James turned to eye him more carefully. "Thanks for what?"

Severus gave a small shrug, a peace and confidence to his whole manner that James could only be proud of. "For this," he motioned between them. "For everything. For making me feel like...a somebody and not...making me feel like you used to. Like I was...unworthy."

James, who'd not considered Severus in that way for a while now, smiled ruefully. "Don't fucking thank me, Severus. You don't thank someone for pulling their head out of their arse. You ask what the fuck took them so long."

Boldly, Severus slipped a hand in the opening of James' shirt and flicked open the buttons, one by one, to reveal smooth tanned flesh. Why be shy when James had already proven, without a doubt that he liked him? He'd turned down Lily Evans for him.

"What took you so long?" he asked, with a faint smile.

"Some people take a ridiculously long time to grow up and see what's right in front of them," James answered in the only way he could, surprised yet not displeased Severus was behaving more confidently.

He let Severus' long fingers splay out over his chest, dark eyes full of wonder. They traced his collar bone, leaving no inch untouched. Severus barely blushed when he met James' hazel eyes. He just smirked slightly and rested his head against his chest, listening lazily to the speed of his heartbeat.

James swallowed, smiling faintly.

Reality outside of Severus' room, and all it had in store could wait, as presently, James had a very real relationship to deal with.

## Chapter 13

James barely saw Severus over the next few weeks, and when he did he was exhausted. The third quidditch match of the season was looming and the Gryffindor team were training harder than ever. Every evening was spent on the pitch, regardless of the weather, leaving little time for social time.

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"Pay attention, Mr. Potter! How an earth do you expect to achieve a decent grade if you have your head in a book?"

James reluctantly peeled his cheek from its comfortable position on parchment, rubbing absently at the red mark he'd imprinted. Grinning lazily, he met Professor McGonagall's piercing stare over several rows of craned necks. "Surely that's the purpose-"

"I meant literally, boy," she reprimanded swiftly, snatching her glasses from her face and increasing the severity of her expression. "In this case, Mr. Potter, one must actually read to obtain knowledge."

James merely shrugged, internally warming with pride as the rest of the class snickered appreciatively at his bold display of cheek.

"Enough, or I shall assign you to personal study with a member of Slytherin House," Professor McGonagall warned absently, shuffling through a stack of papers from her position at the front of the class. "I am sure you'd be adverse to such an arrangement, Potter, considering the match on Saturday."

With a sharp, almost wistful glance out through the towering windows, towards the flags of the stadium, she bowed her head once more to her marking. A moment later, however, the entire class was disturbed from its silence, yet again, by a further display of lack in focus.

"Mr. Potter. How dare you?"

"What?" James spluttered, having obediently reclaimed his quill and resumed his work. "What have I done now?"

Retreating smartly from behind her desk, McGonagall scooped down to collect paper plane into her palm, surveying it with unrestrained hostility.

"That's not mine," James protested instantly. He shook his head adamantly, directing his air of incredulity across the room at a quietly chortling Sirius.

McGonagall's lips tightened into a thin line, as James failed to devise an appropriate apology. "You shall continue the silent period with close observation from Mr. Snape," she announced tersely, leaving no room for argument. "Watch a student who is willing to put his nose to the grindstone-"

The class broke into giggles at the unintentional literal aspect of this statement. Severus' head had shot up from his work with the sound of his name, where his large nose had been practically brushing the table in his concentration.

Glowing scarlet, his eyes were fixed on his teacher with a daring expression of open hostility.

James mouth tightened as their laughter paled Severus' face.

"Professor, I do not think that-"

"Quiet please, Mr. Snape, and gather your things. If your example does not aid Mr. Potter in his studies, then a detention shall follow his irresponsible behaviour, until he learns the price one pays for laziness. Poor grades are obviously an ill source of motivation-"

James made to interrupt her rant of frustration, throwing up his arms theatrically in outrage, but McGonagall silence him with a sharp hand to the desk. If he hadn't known better, he'd have identified something akin to disappointment in her eyes.

"It seems you still must learn the weight of responsibility," she informed him, ushering Severus impatiently up the row of tables until he'd reached James' secluded position at the back. "It's a shame. Recently, your work has improved substantially. Homework specifically."

James sucked in a long drawn breath and nodded mutely, resigned. His expression darkened deliberately when a scowling figure deposited his bag ungracefully at his side.

Hunched over, Severus immediately pulled his books towards him, unintentionally knocking James with his leg and disrupting his ink pot.

"Watch it!" James exclaimed loudly, clutching onto his work with over exaggerated drama, but Severus' barely noticed. His attention was entirely occupied, as he fumbled with his things, pointedly ignoring the sea of smirking faces of pitiless students, like of wave of repression before them. As one, their gazes flicked between the Gryffindor star and the Slytherin, despised even by his own house, keen for a brawl.

Only James, through the corners of his eye, could detect the undercurrents of fear that lurked behind Severus' outward show of indifference.

"Is there no one else I can sit with, professor? Couldn't-"

"No, Mr. Potter. Observe from Mr. Snape and you may actually learn something inside of the classroom." A hint of exasperation was evident from the tightening of McGonagall's eyes, proof that she was nearing the end of her patience. "One day, Mr. Potter, you shall begin to see things without such an arrogant head on your shoulders. When that day arrives, I shall take account of your grievances. Before then, I suggest you work quietly."

James huffed, leaning back in his chair to spin his quill lazily through his fingers. Wisely, he chose not to respond.

When the rest of the class were once again slumped over their desks, scribbling frantically, James slipped his free hand onto his lap, where it travelled the underside of the bench to rest against Severus' thigh, squeezing gently.

The lunch bell rang much too soon for James' liking. He sorely missed the heat of Severus' leg, pressed intimately against his own, when the boy leapt to his feet to collect his things, effectively dislodging his hand.

James hadn't realised that he'd been tracing absent patterns across the Slytherin's knee until the class headed for the door, forcing them apart. The sleepy silence that had previously occupied the classroom had instantly turned into an array of restless activity, creating a hubbub of noise around them. Taking his chances, James deliberately brushed their fingers together in a daring gesture, as he reached for his textbook.

A ghost of a smile itched at Severus' face, but he refused James eye-contact. He was not as good at this game as his lover was. One look at James' face and the whole world would know of his feelings.

Regretfully, Severus straightened up.

Irritated at being ignored, James tugged on his sleeve until Severus' elbow collided gently with the desk, their eyes leveled.

"Meet me outside?"

Staring hard at the dents and scorch marks in the woodwork, Severus felt heat rise into his face and prayed no one was watching. "We can't—" he rasped, but James' hand closed more firmly around his wrist, unwilling to let go.

"Please," James all but begged, dropping his voice to a low murmur, conscious of many students around them. "I haven't... We haven't... It feels like it's been ages, Severus. I know I've been busy but—"

"James come on mate, I'm starved." James spun round at the sound of his friend's voice, throwing him a forced smile.

Unable to protest without rousing suspicion, he allowed Severus' sleeve to slip from his fist.

"I'll meet you there. Give me two seconds, mate," he called over a mass of pointy hats. "Save me something, yeah?"

James' friends disappeared but not all were so easily dismissed.

Sirius narrowed his eyes, craning his head over the crowds to get a better look at James and Severus at the back of the class. He narrowed his eyes and snorting his disgust, brushed past Remus without a word.

Sighing in relief, James turned back to Severus, but he found the space beside him immediately vacated in his distraction. The boy had disappeared without a trace.

Hissing in frustration, James pushed himself from his chair, threw his bag over his shoulder and left the classroom, ignoring McGonagall's stare, narrowed eyes fixed on his back.

James had barely reached the end of the corridor when he felt a sharp tug at his robes. Taken off guard, he gave a surprised yelp and allowed himself to be dragged backwards into an alcove. Hidden by shadows, a hot wet mouth latched onto his neck before James could successfully gather his bearings.

Instantly suspecting some love struck stranger, James pressed his palms against the offender's sides to propel the sudden force away. That was until he was consumed with a familiar scent. Sniffing curiously into the darkness, he detected after shave. And way too much of it. James knew who was experimenting with this particular brand because he'd seen it in their bathroom, on countless occasions.

Insistent hands were tugging at his robes, running over his chest and messing his hair, as if they'd no idea where to first occupy their attention... James mused at the entirely ungraceful display and, as the figure unconsciously brushed against his crotch as they pressed him rather roughly against the wall, decided he liked it.

Grunting softly as teeth grazed the sensitive skin of his shoulder, where his robe had been carelessly crumpled aside, James let his hand slip between their bodies to grip at the obvious hardness poking into his stomach.

In response, he found his hand the target of a series of violent thrusts. Smirking against the lips, roaming along his jaw line to press insistently against his mouth, James yanked the body closer, tangling his hands in shoulder length hair and kissing back with enthusiasm.

"We can't keep doing this," Severus muttered, sometime later, flattening his inevitably greasy hair and attempting to straighten his robes. "Someone's going to-"

"No, they're not," James insisted, batting away Severus' trembling fingers to help redo his tie. "Not if you don't say anything..."

It was strange how, when scheduled meetings were relatively easy to negotiate, James felt far more relaxed about his constant, necessary separation from Severus. Now that he'd finally accepted he wanted the Slytherin for himself, the sudden restriction on their time together was proving more difficult than he could have imagined. He wasn't used to craving someone to the extent he was his newest lover.

Closing his eyes, Severus let out a shallow breath, basking in the sensation of James' fingers, brushing against all of his sensitive spots as they expertly re-manipulated the material of his tie into a loose coil around his neck.

Unable to refuse the temptation, James reached in to lick the exposed skin presented to him, before he covered it with fastened buttons, unsure when he'd get the chance to taste it again.

"James, I—" Severus gasped, automatically rolling his head to the side, enabling his lover all the access he needed. For someone who'd loathed to be touched, he'd undergone a dramatic change. The reassurance provided from James' warm hands on his skin, his mouth firmly against his own, was a sensation the deprived Slytherin was finding increasingly addictive.

To feel loved, and wanted, craved even, was a pleasure that bewildered him more each day James remained so attentive.

"No. We're doing this. Damn them, Sev. There's no reason why we shouldn't be together." James made to leave abruptly, a distasteful expression on his face. He would re-emerge instantly with the flow of students on the other side of the corridor, whom he'd grown to loathe in their prejudice, but Severus groped through the darkness to clasp James' hand in his own, successfully tangling their fingers together.

"Not yet," he pleaded, pressing his face into the front of the Gryffindor's robes, at a loss of what else to do. His repulsion with his own weakness was rivaled only by the gut clenching panic that erupted each time they prepared to part. He'd been perfectly content with his loneliness when he'd had nothing to compensate it... No one to share such warmth. But now James was so solidly embedded in his life, he could not stand to have such willing affection ripped from him again, just to reform an old visage of hate.

"Stay... I can't...I don't..."

James smiled gently, glad Severus couldn't see him. "Not now."

"I could—" Severus protested, desperation clear in the breaking of his voice.

"No," James said quietly, shaking his head in the darkness. "I'll come by later. After practice. I

Promise."

A rustling of material alerted James to the fact that Severus was wiping roughly at his eyes.

"Severus...you're shaking like a leaf," he spoke suddenly, but his attempts at consolidation were thrown off by an angry shove against his chest.

When Severus remained silent, James expected the worse. Tentatively, he reached out for the boy's face. He found a damp cheek and held it to his palm, despite Severus' attempts to jerk away.

"Tell me," James insisted.

He sighed heavily when no response came. He'd known dating Severus would have its sore points. It would be hard, challenging, and lacking in instant rewards. James was only just realising the extent of the contract he'd bound himself to in taking this boy on. He attempted to remove his hand, but a pressure immediately appeared to hold it there.

"You're all I have," Severus whispered finally.

James closed his eyes, swallowing sharply. Honesty was rare with Severus, but when it came, it always hit hard. Taking a deep breath, he granted a lingering kiss to Severus' forehead, placing a second, more delicate press of lips to his eyebrow.

"I'll see you later. We'll talk then ok? Stop panicking... Everything's fine."

...

The remainder of the week passed quickly, in a haze of rushed activity.

Aside from furtive glances across potion fumed classrooms and tightly packed hallways, their interaction was limited. Not that their infrequent meetings, of stolen minutes in dark corners were not heated, made painfully intimate by whispered encouragement and shared apprehension, because they were, increasingly so. James was delicately pushing the boundaries between them until Severus was just as frustrated with concealing their affections as he was.

If Severus wanted more than simple, heavy groping, some truly explicit kissing and un-coordinated rutting, he made no show of it, but James had his suspicions.

There was a significant level of protection from the undercurrent of excitement, rumbling through the school and threatening to overwhelm the students at any point, distracting any potential suspicions. Such enthusiasm was centered around the oncoming Ball, overshadowing all other end of term traditions to leave the students in a fit of nervous excitement.

James and Severus were not the only ones counting down the days.

With summer approaching, thick robes had been abandoned for rolled sleeves and trousers upturned, with clear blue skies and the scent of popular muggle sun cream sending even the most stressed into high spirits.

As much as he'd missed his friends, James also had to accept that spending any more time with Amy would only provide temptation he was desperate to avoid. Dislodging himself from his temporary gang had already proved awkward, but his sudden, blatant disinterest in their female member had proved a particular sore point. Safe to say, James would not be welcome within their ranks again.

As for side-stepping the remainder of the female population at Hogwarts, James had never found the task more burdensome. He had lost count of the number of times he'd been asked to the Ball, from numerous leggy blondes, to the most unexpected candidates, including males, whose hidden lust had made a brave dive to the surface with such a unique occasion. Apparently, he was a prize to be had, with a number of high staking bets placed on who he would personally select to escort to the due.

What a surprise his fans would have when he turned up with Severus Snape on his arm.

Without the satisfying knowledge that he would be able to, at one point or another, accept all reasonable offers of courtship, sex playing the domineering role, the fun was sapped from James' usual annual entertainment. His trademark, cheeky grin gradually slipped from his handsome features until he was repeating the word 'no' in monotone, his face grim with exasperated boredom, leaving the constant rejections an awkward and depressing task.

Sundays were James' favourite days. No quidditch practice, no classes... he could spend the whole day locked up with Severus and pretend the rest of the world didn't exist. He'd returned to the common room much later than normal that night, and it hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Is that a particular tune?"

"What?" James responded absently, eyes glued to his last-minute homework. When the question was not repeated, he glanced up, an eyebrow raised in inquiry. Two sets of familiar eyes were staring at him, their expressions difficult to read in the darkness that was gradually filling the room, as the hour grew late.

James flicked his wand, igniting the small candle that stood in the middle of the table, encircling him in a pool of light.

"What?" he repeated.

Sirius leant forward, his face thrown into the light. The chess game he and Remus had been playing had long been packed away. James was given the unnerving feeling that they'd been watching him for some time.

"You were humming."

James frowned, opening his mouth to respond flippantly, but reconsidered. There was a glint in Sirius' dark eyes that he could not quite decipher. More obviously, there was no sign of amusement, only barely concealed accusation.

"Sorry," James stated blandly, returning to his work.

"You've also been smiling like a goon since you got here," Sirius added, glancing sideways at Remus, as though for confirmation, but the werewolf turned his head towards the fire and remained silent.

"Since when was that illegal?" James set down his quill, ensuring his face was carefully blank.

"You're staying in tonight then?" Sirius spoke again a few moments later, once more breaking into James' attempt to concentrate.

"Yes..." James answered slowly. "Why do you ask?"

Sirius shrugged, pushing a hand through his hair and leaning back to cross his legs at the ankles.

"Just wondering... You seem to be spending all of your free time with Snape at the moment. Every chance you get. I thought you'd prefer his company-"

"It's not like that," James cut across him, heating up around the collar. "I'd much rather be here with you guys...You know that."

Sirius continued to stare.

"I know this has been hard on all of us," James continued calmly, ignoring his friends' unappreciative snort. "But we only have another week until...until everything becomes clear. Then things will be back to normal."

Sirius crossed his arms over his chest, his expression masked. "It's blatantly obvious he's already head over heels for you, Prongs. He watches you. All the time. He's hardly subtle. You've got to him big time. Why wait another week to be rid of him?"

James cleared his throat, before swallowing uncomfortably. "I'm not taking any chances. There's no point in...speeding things up unnecessarily, is there? Besides, I thought we said the Ball would be the best-"

"Not if you were desperate for it to be over," Sirius shrugged, something of a challenge in his eyes. One James didn't dare rise to, for fear of exposing himself.

Sirius stared at him for a long moment, a small frown on his face. "You've changed, James."

"Really?" James responded absently, feigning disinterest while his mind ran into turmoil.

"Yep. If I didn't know better, I'd say you enjoy spending your every waking moment with that bat. What the fuck do you two do all day? I bet you just sit there, soaking up the success, while the obsessive freak plays with your cock-"

"For the love of Merlin!" James faked disgust at the thought, brushing his books to the side with exaggerated impatience to stare at his friend stonily. "Go on then, Padfoot. Say it. Whatever it is that's on your chest and your just dying to throw at me. Let's have it."

Sirius fidgeted discreetly in his chair, until his legs were folded under himself, the firelight casting odd shapes across his handsome face. Only then did James realise that he'd grown extremely pale with tension.

"You've changed," Sirius repeated quietly.

James rolled his eyes. "If that's all you have to say-"

"I don't like it. None of us do. You haven't pranked in ages. Your turning into-"

"Into what? A decent human being? I don't have time to wreck havoc every hour of the day and mock people, Sirius. In case you've forgotten, I'm trying to win the bet you set me."

"That's not the point! What about the marauders? What about us?"

"Sirius, I'm trying to win a bet. I've been stressed-"

"But you're not!" Sirius interrupted angrily. "You're not...unhappy. Tense, yeah, ok...Frustrated, yeah...But that's only when you're not with him-"

"I have to be with him-"

"Not all the time. It's already in the bag. He loves you! It's blatant."

James turned away, his chest tightening with an unidentifiable emotion, but Sirius was relentless.

"You always come back from those stinking dungeons with a smug smile on your face! You hum to yourself. You sit and you do your homework. Since when did you care about grades? You used to moan every time you went to see Snape and now you practically skip down the corridor! We're the ones who are worried. Me, Remus and Peter. You don't even talk about the bet anymore. It's like...you know you've won. The games over and you're in on the treat...and we're not. We're marauders, James. Four, not one. We share everything."

James opened his mouth to interrupt but Sirius ploughed on angrily.

"We're supposed to be planning the greatest show of humiliation ever, and you're hardly even interested. Do you even want it to end?"

"Of course I do!" James spluttered. "I'm not lying to you."

Sirius shook his head. "You may be able to fool your little boyfriend, and even yourself, James, but I know you. You're hiding something."

James opened his mouth, hiding his hurt at Sirius' annoying, albeit accurate, assumption.

"Think what you want, Padfoot," James muttered finally, casting an irritated glance in Remus' direction for his unhelpfulness and lack of support. "And what about you, Mooney? Have you been harbouring any grudges I should know about?"

Remus glanced up, but did not reply. He merely shook his head side to side in a slow movement, fingers clenched tightly around the book in his lap.

Sirius opened his mouth, his lip curling in the pretense of hurling an insult, but Remus' hand on his wrist distracted his attention. "Enough," was all he said, and grudgingly, Sirius complied.

James looked between the two of them with a sinking gut. If Sirius reacted this way to the thought of him simply appreciating Severus' company, he would definitely never tell his friends the true extent of his feelings. He was a fool to think Sirius would ever accept his relationship with a Slytherin, least of all Severus.

"Fine. Whatever. I'm going to bed," Sirius announced, when James remained tight-lipped. Without another word, he threw off Remus' hand and strode across the room. He paused before he reached the door, sighed deeply and slowly pulled a dark object from his pocket.

James froze when he recognised the book and the writing on the front. Large, loopy, inappropriate, damning, stupid words...

"Sirius, I-"

The book landed on the table in front of him with a thump, dislodging his pot of ink and sending it to the floor, where it seeped greedily into the carpet.

The door slammed shut behind Sirius, and James was left to stare at his own handwriting, where he'd written 'Severus and James,' in invisible marker, over and over again. Combined with an array of ridiculous drawings of snakes and lions.

"Shit..." James swore finally. Why Sirius would choose to check his books for concealer was

beyond James. He could not even raise his head to look at Remus, whose gaze was burning into the side of his face. Sirius had given him the chance to confess, repeatedly, but he'd ignored it. He'd lied and now he'd lost his best friend.

"He had a few beers before you got back," Remus explained calmly, surprising James. "He's been tense all day."

James swallowed as he met the unreadable expression in Remus' eyes. "And you?" he asked quietly. "How have...you been?"

"You mean how do I feel about...that?" He jabbed a finger toward the book, equally as cryptically and watched as James flinched. "I feel...disappointed. I feel...angry, frustrated, happy, confused, shocked as hell!"

"Wait. Did you say...happy?"

Remus nodded, smiling gently to relieve some of the tension between them. "The book wasn't the giveaway James, your face was."

James grumbled incoherent swear words into his palm, cursing his own ineffective secrecy. "Why aren't you yelling?" he asked finally, separating his fingers to peer apprehensively at Remus.

Remus leaned forward, surveying his friend closely through tired eyes. "James, out of all the people you've ever dated, you've never once been in love. What you have with Severus is...unique. It's complicated, it's messy, and probably volatile...but it's real. It's the most real thing you've ever had. How could I not be happy for you?"

"But I lied to you," James grimaced. "Sirius is right. I've been ignoring you!"

"I told you to. It was part of the plan, remember?"

"But Remus, I messed up! I was never meant to fall in love...like Severus back. And now Sirius isn't going to get the great big show of humiliation he's always wanted... I've let him down. I knew this bet would tear us apart," James groaned, ranting irritably. "It was a stupid sacrifice to make. Sirius won't understand because he'd never had his life held in the palm of his worst enemies hand. And he thinks it's just in the bag..."

"Does Severus love you then?" Remus asked quietly, massaging his temples. "Is it in the bag?"

James leant back with a sigh, closing his revision text with a snap. "I haven't asked him yet. I have a week left. There's no problem!"

"Isn't there?" Remus asked abruptly, his face darkening with the unidentifiable emotion he'd been consumed with before Sirius had first spoken. "Because you haven't been sharing your progress with us. You've been...distant, James. The ignoring part was necessary, but keeping us informed...You failed on that one. You can't blame Sirius for getting touchy. He's your best mate. He's worried. And so am I."

James snorted, but his eyes were unfocused, as if he were considering Remus' explanation to a deeper level than he let on.

"I think Sirius misses you," Remus continued softly, eyeing James carefully. "And he's right to. Any...real feelings you have towards Severus are nothing short of a threat as far as he is concerned. I know the bet is important and you're only doing what we planned, but I think Sirius takes your absence much more personally. He sees far more, between you and Severus, than he ever lets on..."

I think he was hoping you'd come to him and explain what was happening...that you'd laugh it off..."

James dropped his eyes to his lap, his throat constricting uncomfortably. "There's more to it than that though, isn't there?" he asked quietly. "Sirius said... I'd changed. What did he mean?"

Remus sighed, glancing at the door where Sirius had disappeared with anxiety.

"Come on, Mooney. Humour me."

Shaking his head, Remus contradicted himself by answering tersely, as though he longed to avoid the subject all together. "If you simply wanted to seduce someone, you wouldn't have put in half of the heart that you have. Nor half the effort. It's the looks, the smiles...the twitch you get each time someone cuts down Severus in class, and you can't do a damn thing about it-"

"I don't twitch-"

"Yeah, you do. And you sweat too. Merlin, James. Just look at yourself," Remus pointed incredulously. "If you want to identify change, look in the mirror. When was the last time you purposefully messed up your hair? When was the last time you polished your broomstick? When was the last time you did anything deliberate for anyone's attention other than Snape-"

"His name's Severus," James snapped without thinking.

Remus smiled through a sigh. "See what I mean?"

"Your more...relaxed," Remus continued, gesturing widely with his arms, giving James no time to respond. "You've...don't take this the wrong way, but you've matured considerably in the past couple of weeks. You've... grown up a lot James. Sirius just isn't ready for that. You'll always be annoying, reckless, relatively arrogant...but you're beginning to act with an awareness now. Heaven knows it's taken you long enough, but it will take Sirius longer to appreciate that things...have to change. He can't remain a kid forever."

"And he blames all of this on Severus?" James asked incredulously.

"I won't deny that he may have had...some influence, especially on your behaviour. Since you've been spending time in the dungeons you're practically bursting with... nervous energy. It's like excitement, only there's a danger to your actions that thrills you-"

James begun to protest, unwilling to allow Remus to believe what he felt for Severus was cheap, but he was quietened by the continuation of the werewolf's rant.

"And then there's those times when you gaze off into space, and you get this...content expression on your face. Like your remembering, or hoping, or just feeling...or something. It's like your relationship with Severus means more to you than simply fulfilling the bet. I think you underestimate your expression when you're looking at him. Sometimes...the potential reality-"

"There wasn't always-"

"-the sincerity...It is very unnerving. And that adds the final punch."

"Merlin, Remus..." James sighed, his heart beating wildly in his chest. He rubbed a hand over his face roughly, thinking fast, as the reality of Remus' assessment begun to set in. He didn't know how much he could go on lying... And Remus seemed like a more appropriate person to confess everything to than Sirius.

"Do you love him?" Remus asked plainly into the following awkward silence, causing James to scoff unconvincingly.

When Remus merely looked at him, eyes knowing, James' whole body had sagged, his heart suddenly feeling much heavier than it had before.

"Funny how, in all the years you've antagonized him, you've handed him all of the cards on this one," Remus commented lightly, a hint of amusement in his voice as he attempted to lighten the atmosphere. "You set out to seduce him, and ended up trapping yourself in the exact same scenario."

Unwilling to dare believe that the lack of repulsion in Remus' immediate acceptance of his position was really so sincere, James let his head rest in his hands.

"I never meant to...get emotionally involved. You have to know that. I fought against it every step of the way. A part of me, a big part, is still repulsed by-"

"It's ok. You don't have to justify-"

"I can't humiliate him. I'd rather die first."

James started when a gentle hand was pressed to his shoulder. Remus' was smiling faintly down at him, his eyes warm and hesitantly encouraging.

"Did you think I would judge you?" he asked quietly. "Is that why you haven't confided in me?"

"No!" James protested instantly. "I just...Ok, maybe a little. I was scared, Remus. It's not natural-"

"I think it's completely natural," Remus argued gently, moving to occupy the seat closest to James. "Spending so much time together... practically sharing everything. You may have thought you knew Severus before, so it makes your...likeness to him more surprising, but really, you never gave him a chance. Ever since your damn hormones kicked in you've been searching for the best, dating anyone in a short enough skirt. It makes sense, in a strange way, that you'd find contentment with someone like Severus."

"And what do I say to Sirius?" James asked wearily. "Tell me that, Remus. He'll never look at me again if I stay with Severus."

Remus frowned thoughtfully. "I presume you're still taking Severus to the ball? As...a real boyfriend?"

James nodded uneasily. He'd been considering this for a while. "I have to, Mooney. It's part of the bet remember?"

Remus looked strained as he repeated himself. "James, are you telling me that you aren't going to humiliate him? You plan to stay with him, even after the ball?"

James rubbed his face with his hands. "I don't know," he said again. "I don't know where the hell this is going. All I know is I won't hurt him, Remus. He can't take it."

Remus swallowed. "And the bet?"

"Well... I'll just have to pray that he loves me. And that he never finds out why all of this happened," James breathed.

"And if the bet does require you to humiliate him-"

"Does it?"

Remus sighed heavily, eyeing James with deep affection and anxiety. "I hope not. You're sure about this?"

Asking himself the same question, James felt a rueful grin slip onto his face. "I must be. I turned down Lily, just to keep him. There's so much more to him that I discovered. Stuff you wouldn't see in a classroom full of people who hate him... If you'd been in my position, and forced to seduce him, you may have seen a similar side. He's witty, he's sharp, he's funny, he's clever.."

When James finally finished rambling, he found Remus watching him with a soft, knowing smile.

Aware that his tone had become audibly affectionate, James cleared his throat and added quietly. "He's a good guy."

"I don't doubt it."

"So..." James grinned, as though a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "I have your blessing?"

"If you're sure Severus is what you want," Remus grinned back, brimming with a sudden excitement; the last of his caution was thrown away as he was caught up in James' enthusiasm. "I must say, I've been waiting for the day someone would finally get under your skin. Kind of...unfortunate that it was a Slytherin. You're going to have to sacrifice a lot to be with him... Let's just get you through this Ball first..."

James nodded. "Well it was never going to be a secret forever... Hogwarts is going to get the shock of the century..."

Talking with Remus, late into the night, was far more comforting than James could have imagined. By the time they'd fallen into comfortable silence, he'd never been more content with his own feelings.

As he tucked himself into bed, he stared tiredly at the still lump opposite, that he knew to be Sirius. It would kill him to choose between them, but if it was to prove inevitable, Severus would remain his. Whenever, however.

If Sirius was a true friend, he had to understand that.

## Chapter 14

Severus glanced at the sky, squinting as bright rays briefly obscured his vision. Recoiling under the heat, he averted his face, unappreciative of the warmth.

The din of numerous birds, projecting their noisy delight with the abrupt change in season, only added to Severus' impatience. The itching soreness around his face, which suggested that his pale skin had already begun to burn, was a cruel reminder that he was far better suited to the clouded, depressive nature of the preceding months.

He tensed when the figure, striding lazily beside him, gave a deep chuckle. "It is a pleasant day, Severus. Why not take off your coat?"

Shaking his head, Severus jerked backwards from a speeding butterfly, narrowly missing its rapidly beating wings. He swirled round, robes fluttering, in order to follow its progress with a hateful stare.

His silent threat was broken when a poorly concealed snort suggested he'd provoked yet further unintentional amusement.

"I have to say, I never assumed I'd find you so...humorous," his companion admitted, almost tenderly. "Perhaps we should dine together more often."

Blinking, Severus straightened his spine in a belated attempt to portray a level of sophistication he'd somewhat abandoned in his flustered state. His scowl smoothed into wary apprehension as his gaze shifted upwards towards the tall, immaculate blonde at his side.

Severus shrank internally as he registered the unrepressed sense of mockery on the handsome features.

"Yes... Mr. Malfoy," he agreed hesitantly. He was not in the company of a boy his age, and therefore, Severus' limited experience in social situations did not enable him to readily extract the appropriate title. His fellow Slytherin was very nearly a man and Severus saw him as such.

Severus flinched involuntarily as a cool hand was placed on his shoulder, grey eyes burning into his own with an uncomfortable intensity. "Lucius, Severus. How many times must I tell you?"

"Of course. I-"

"Quiet now," Lucius chastised softly.

Obediently silent, Severus allowed Lucius to twist him round until his back was pressed firmly against the taller boy's chest. A greasy strand of hair was flicked from obscuring Severus' ear, and then a voice had lowered to speak into it, barely heard over the frantic thudding of Severus' heart.

"Now tell me, do you see the foot of the mountain? Beyond the Forbidden Forest?"

Craning his neck, Severus followed the line of Lucius outstretched arm.

"And this track? Is the destination obvious?"

Severus winced when a cane crossed his vision, drawn from Lucius' side to swing sharply towards the earth beneath them for dramatic clarification.

Smothering his envy at the older boy's empowering possession, Severus examined the path, following it's vague progress with eager eyes. He had not noticed such an obvious, man-made clearing in the soft lawn of the courtyard before, but now it had been identified, he knew he'd never forget it. Not in a lifetime.

"I see it," Severus whispered hoarsely. His chest swelled with ambition, as dreams long left unfulfilled were given fresh promise.

There was no concealing the pure look of wonder and unmistakable adoration on his face, as he twisted awkwardly to meet Lucius sharp gaze.

Unintentionally, a lock of Lucius' silky hair draped across Severus' narrow shoulders as their bodies shifted. Why Lucius had not yet released him from such an inappropriately intimate hold, Severus was unaware. His puzzlement did not diminish the adrenaline, pounding his veins and rendering him unresponsive to such anxiety.

Selfishly, Severus wished he was able to welcome the shudders that shot through his body, as they were drawn into such rare, close contact. However, a twinge of guilt prevented him from fully appreciating how utterly intoxicating it was to have such a desirable, older and much more powerful boy, treat him with such attention.

Instead, he could only register discomfort and restlessness as Lucius smirked knowingly, doing nothing to rectify the situation and clearly using his position of dominance to induce intimidation.

Lucius' intrigue increased as he scanned Severus' face, as though considering the boy. "Cast my instructions to memory," he instructed, before straightening up and nudging Severus forward.

A series of shallow pants assaulted Severus as he found himself mercifully released. He hadn't realised the extent of the threat in his constraints until he rubbed at his sore wrists, where the indents of fingernails were clearly visible.

"Now, I have fulfilled my duties to the Dark Lord, I will admit a little... surprise on my part, with regard to you, Severus," Lucius explained calmly, folding his arms behind his back and watching Severus squint in the sun. "I never expected to find such a...willing server in you. Alas, I had not even considered you much of a Slytherin. I have always assumed you...frail. Weak. Selfish-"

A sharp hiss broke through Lucius' insults, as Severus' wounded pride ignited a rare flash of courage. "I can assure you that I am none of those things. Loyally, I am a Slytherin, as I always intend to be."

"You shall have to prove what you are not, Severus. Actions speak louder than words in the eyes of our Lord," Lucius said, a hint of amusement returning to his voice. His cold eyes raked slowly over Severus' form, his brow creased in thought.

Before Severus could protest, he found himself once again pressed to Lucius front, his hands prized to his side.

Severus swallowed, itching to shift in Lucius' tight hold in order to read the expression on the boy's face, but it seemed Lucius had intended purpose for their current position. Allowing his hands to slip from the boy's shoulders to rest at his waist, murmuring vague, explicit possibilities all the while, Lucius eased the doubt from Severus' mind until his intentions were quite clear.

"As I thought," Lucius breathed into his hair, as Severus moaned quietly against his chest. "I could quite easily... bend you to my will. However will you serve the Dark Lord when you show such

relief on release from my presence? And then mould yourself to me, once again, with such willingness. I will not have you fear intimacy, nor will I have you a mindless receptor of my attentions."

Grounding down his rising panic, Severus forced himself to distraction. "I do not claim complete competence. I shall require teaching."

"Of course," Lucius replied smoothly, running his palm along the back of Severus' neck. "You do not know how glad I am that you came to me, Severus, expressing your desire for...something much greater than what is offered by Albus Dumbledore. Your timing was quite inept. Recruitment is the Dark Lord's current concern. I shall prepare you quite well for a meeting with him. You shall find your place in our new...regime. I congratulate you on the success of your integration."

Severus nodded mutely in nervous acceptance, drawn to the unimaginable power Lucius promised. It was worth every ounce of dignity Lucius ruthlessly tore from him. To serve Voldemort was his destiny. To match James Potter's power...To rival him in popularity...To equal his talents...It was the only way to sustain his existence once the Gryffindor had come to his senses, and left him.

With power on his side, he would not only be joining ranks with the most able, powerful wizard on the planet, but he'd retain James' respect when their relationship inevitably crumbled into oblivion.

"If you wish to be branded with... the mark, be at that that location on the night of the Ball," Lucius continued, keeping his position from behind very close to the smaller boy's face. "I assume you are as distasteful with the headmaster's foolish tradition of public foolishness as I."

A twitch resided in Severus' left temple, stuttering his immediate agreement and swiftly stealing it of any validity.

"Do not tell me you intend to attend such a...fiasco..." Lucius wondered aloud, amusement once again underlining his words. "Who on earth would go with you?"

Severus winced sharply, unhinged by the knock of confidence caused deliberately by the Lucius' harsh accuracy. "I have no desire to attend," he muttered to the floor.

"Then I shall see you tomorrow at midnight. For a moment I thought perhaps you were implying that there was a place for the blind at this school," Lucius gave a short laugh. "Not that you don't have fine attributes, Severus. You are merely an acquired taste. Now, do not be late tomorrow. The Dark Lord and I shall be waiting."

Shivering in anticipation, Severus inclined his head. "Thank you, Lucius."

Keeping Severus close for a moment longer than necessary, Lucius gave into impulse and darted out a tongue to briefly lick the shell of Severus' ear, a hand roaming to twist in the boy's dark hair at the base of his neck.

His smirk widened when Severus stiffened in fear beneath him.

Daringly, Lucius clamped his hand more deliberately to Severus' bony waist, holding him still as his alternate palm traveled experimentally down the angular line of the boy's body. There was obviously no doubt in his mind that Severus would deny his advances, merely curiosity as how far the inexperienced, guarded male would allow him to go.

"With time, you shall come to serve me also, Severus," Lucius promised softly, eyes glinting with an emotion Severus could not quite identify. "So young..."

A thrill of fear shot down Severus' spine, mingled with perverse excitement as Lucius regarded him without his usual, calm indifference. He loathed the man, but his power was something Severus had always envied.

"You would not be the first."

A grunt escaped from Severus' tightly clenched lips, as Lucius' wandering hand fanned over his crotch with a meaning not even Severus could mistake. As he was grasped tightly with deft fingers, blood rushed to Severus' groin and he found himself recoil in distaste. Lucius was right. He was pathetic. For all his show of defense and toughness, he had no control.

Hissing as he was stroked with capable hands, Severus fought to concentrate on the present.

To throw off the Slytherin would prove suicidal, and a significant part of Severus was far too content with the erotic nature of their position, to so forcefully reject the attentions. Instead, he forced his brain to function rationally and pictured hazel eyes and a lean, tanned frame as Lucius massaged his crotch, convincing himself that if he did so, his current actions would not be considered unloyal to his boyfriend.

"Do not disappoint me now," Lucius murmured, as he gave one last, aggressive thrust against Severus' rigid form before releasing all contact abruptly and striding back towards the castle in complete, elegant composure.

Severus watched him leave with dark eyes, a despising frown on his face.

Snorting distastefully, he brushed himself down, able only to appreciate that his tented trousers began to shrink almost immediately as the distance between them increased. Sweat had built on his brow and his only thought was of finding shade in the cool, reassuring dampness of the dungeons.

If Severus dared to analyse his own actions, he'd find a small consolidation in the fact that a touch from James would leave him in need of desperate release, a plain and unwavering arousal, whereas the inclination he felt towards Lucius was much more difficult to place.

Unconsciously clutching his forearm, Severus' eyes drifted towards the quidditch final, where banners were already flying high.

His days of attempting restlessly to appease the older Slytherin boy had finally been rewarded. He knew he'd found a mentor in Lucius Malfoy; a boy he respected, admired, feared more than any other.

Blinking rapidly, Severus felt a chill descend through his entire being, despite the warmth, and fastened the highest buttons on his cloak. Ignoring the weight of caution, that urged him to pay greater attention to his dangerous actions, and prioritise more carefully, he basked in the satisfaction of being noticed, not only by James Potter, but by one of Voldemort's most trusted Slytherin's.

Striding forwards to briefly shield himself under the trees of the forest, Severus wondered at the coming hours. The whole school would be out at the stadium, cheering on James Potter...while he, rubbish, helpless, failed boyfriend that he was, fantasized in the dungeons over dark, explicit fantasies of his role in the Dark Lord's inner circle - A part of his life in which James could never play a part, as much as Severus may have wished it.

Jerking his head upwards, Severus could make out a small group, laughing and joking, making their way towards the field... None of them knowing James' dirty little secret. How different their

reactions would be if they knew him, Severus Snape, to be a respected somebody. A death eater. He had to be prepared for the most likely direction for his future, with included, sadly, James leaving him for someone far more presentable. He needed security. He was not like James. The Gryffindor would not stay with him forever. He could not be so reckless so as not to have a backup plan. Lucius would soundly provide it.

"Oi! Severus!"

Recognising the voice instantly, Severus rolled his eyes over his shoulder, his thoughtful scowl gradually slipping as he watched James bound towards him like an excited puppy. How the boy had identified him in the shadows, he did not know, but a moment later he had reluctantly stepped back into the sunlight, smiling unconsciously.

Dressed in only a Gryffindor shirt and baggy shorts, James was obviously loving everything about the bright sunshine.

However, all dark thoughts fluttered to the back of Severus' mind as he found his contentment with seeing his boyfriend unrivaled by anything malicious, uniting them on common ground.

James' shaggy head was flickering around in a preliminary sweep to ensure the immediate vicinity was empty. Hair flying in every direction, hazel eyes brimming with nervous excitement, he was a picture indeed.

Before Severus could protest, he had been spun around forcefully. He gestured helplessly towards the castle, but as always, James' enthusiasm was providing an irritating distraction.

"Where do you think you're going?" James grinned, looping an arm round Severus' shoulders and planting a sloppy kiss on the side of his face. "It's the quidditch finals!"

"Yes, I know," Severus answered, disentangling himself awkwardly. With one last covert glance at Lucius' retreating form, he turned his attention to James in the hope that he'd forget the entire encounter. "I see you are prepared. Early, however."

"Yup. I wanna get some practice in first," James nodded, full of adrenaline only his favourite sport could produce. "Slytherin vs. Gryffindor. Placed your bets?"

A slow smirk spread across Severus' face, as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I have no doubt of the outcome."

"Don't tell me you're going to support the snakes?" James cried indignantly, nudging Severus until his path was altered and they were walking, side by side, down to the stadium. Slipping an arm round Severus' waist possessively, James used his free hand to toy with the emerald scarf that hung loosely about the Slytherin's neck, despite the stifling warmth.

Severus snorted, without humour. "In case you have not forgotten, I am a so called snake, Potter. Leave my scarf alone. I will not allow you to 'incendio' it."

James blinked, snatching back his hand and feigning innocence. Another transgression with Severus' growing confidence was that he had reverted to calling James by his surname, more often than not. Whatever that implied in his boyfriend's subconscious, James didn't know, but as long as it was said without malice, he couldn't care too much.

As for Severus being a Slytherin, James had never felt warmer towards that particular house for producing such a delectable student.

"Fine... I shouldn't be seen fraternizing with the enemy anyway." With a sly grin, he pushed Severus away playfully and bounded ahead of him, broomstick thrown over his shoulder.

Severus rolled his eyes. "You should have thought about that before you considered seducing me," he muttered, despairing of James' good mood.

Releasing a snitch from his pocket, James threw it up in the air to catch it effortlessly, diving onto his broom with entirely unnecessary melodrama to make the catch.

"Come here, you fool," Severus called finally, when he could bare James' pointed ignorance of his presence any longer, disgusted with the neediness he heard in his voice. That soon evaporated as James laughed loudly, a carefree expression that had Severus' own lips tilting favourably and his stomach swooping.

For as long as he lived, no matter what happened, he would not forget moments like this he spent with James.

"Did you honestly consider the consequences when you first... approached me?" Severus asked, as indifferently as he could, while James wandered obediently back to his side to lay an arm round his shoulders and hum tunelessly.

"It's too late now, regardless," James shrugged around him. "I guess I'll just have to tolerate it."

"I am never going to change," Severus stated bluntly, twisting his head until he met James' hazel eyes, suddenly feeling that his origins were incredibly important. He wanted to keep James for as long as he could, after all. "If you do not like the idea of... courting a Slytherin-"

"I find it quite...sexy actually," James confessed quietly, with uncharacteristic shyness. "I never thought I would... But it kinda fits. We're opposites. The lion and the serpent."

Severus coughed throughout James' bashful explanation, cheeks flaming.

James refused Severus the freedom to wriggle out of his grip. Instead, he lowered his head to the Slytherin's ear and repeated, "sexy," again and again, loving how such a simple word had the ability to make his lover visibly tremble. It was a power James selfishly enjoyed.

As his nerves gradually subsided, Severus smirked to himself between a curtain of hair, taking pleasure in what he felt should be forbidden. He failed to rouse the motivation to challenge such a delightful idea that would include him as sexy.

"As for courting..." James continued, staring down at Severus with a mixture of affection and bemusement. "In case you haven't noticed, we're not in the Dark Ages any longer. I for one, prefer the term shagging. It unites all sorts of possibilities..."

Comfortable silence followed them through the grounds. Empty stands and a desolate pitch created an very different picture to the usual deafening roar of activity that usually occupied the space, not that Severus was complaining. Tentatively, he followed James into the changing rooms and watched curiously as the Gryffindor threw down his things below the peg marked 'Captain'.

"Not very glamorous, is it?" James commented lightly, gesturing around, almost if apprehensive of Severus' opinion. "Showers are through there...Boardroom in there. Pitch that way. I think that's it."

Severus smiled tightly, pivoting on his heel and imagining James' quidditch friends occupying the exact space he stood in now, in just a few short hours. How the atmosphere would be different then. How he could no longer have a place by James' side.

Feeling himself recoil at the unpleasant thought, he shut his eyes and fisted his hands at his sides, wanting to block out the thought and envision a world in which he and James were the only ones that existed. Not even Voldemort was significant in the ideal world, where all Severus wanted was James.

Without confidence in their relationship, his attachment to the Dark Arts would only grow deeper. While Severus did not view this inevitable conclusion entirely bitterly, he still held some significant hope that he and James would at least last for the summer. He wouldn't be able to keep his desire to serve Voldemort a secret forever, and James would never want to be with him if he found out.

Warm, minty breath on his face roused Severus from his misery.

"Stop over-analysing everything. You think way too much," James murmured, resting his hands on Severus' hips to kiss him gently on the forehead.

Severus sighed, placing his palms on James' chest and searching his eyes warily. "And you not enough. If your...friends knew I was here, they'd—"

"Forget them," James insisted, with frustration. "I don't care what they think right now. I want to show my boyfriend where I get changed." His face broke into a slow grin. "Completely innocently of course."

Severus sucked in a breath as James' hand dropped to trace the curve of his belt. Recklessly, James slipped one hand up further, until it rested on the warm skin of Severus' side, while the other slipped beneath black trousers to finger the top of the boy's boxers.

"Do you have any completely rational set of your usual objections as to why I shouldn't kiss you now?" James asked softly, the temptation too dear to pass up. "Right here? No? Silence, Severus? I'd hate to think my naughty ways were rubbing off on you. Such a bad Slytherin. Sneaking round Gryffindor changing rooms, infatuating their captain..."

Severus groaned, and pressed his lips against James' thin ones in a rough kiss, before he could be teased further. James responded vigorously and Severus quickly forgot his surroundings altogether. For the second time that day, his trousers became distorted. However, on this occasion, he was quite comfortable with the idea of it happening.

"James..." Severus muttered between kisses, almost to himself. "Is this going to last?"

Severus wasn't surprised when James didn't verbally respond to the question that could have so many meanings. A probing tongue stemmed any further speech, mapping his mouth with renewed vigour.

Stepping out some time later, with swollen red lips and an achingly hard erection, Severus drew his collar higher about his neck, despite the gathering warmth, in order to conceal his impressive hickey.

"Fucking Potter," he muttered, watching his lover sweep through the sky at a hundred feet. Shoving his hands down his pants, he readjusted himself, only to groan when he hardened further at the contact.

Swearing, he folded his arms across his chest and watched James fly. It was a natural ability Severus would forever envy. Though he was sure that the Gryffindor was diving and swooping far too often than was required, as if he were attempting to impress someone, or at least put on a good

show.

Severus smirked smugly when he glanced about him, to find he was the only person to whom that could apply.

When the first set of students began to filter into the stands, Severus shrunk back into the shadows and James drifted back to the ground, his face flushed and hair thrown back from the wind.

"One day I'll take you flying," he promised, throwing his broom over his shoulder and smiling widely. "Just me and you."

Severus swallowed nervously, diverting from such a scary thought with familiar cynicism. "I now know how you managed to procure such an extensive line of lovers, Potter. You are a sentimental romantic."

James' smile faltered for a moment, until he realised Severus was teasing. He was indeed used to entertaining girls with sappy, rehearsed sentiments. With Severus, he supposed the mush would have to be tuned down. He was still only learning about this boy.

"Stop calling me 'Potter,'" he said abruptly, changing the subject.

"Why?"

"It's too impersonal."

"How about...darling?" Severus proposed innocently, eyes sparkling with mirth only bantering with James could bring out of him.

James snorted. "Try it and see what happens."

Placing a chaste kiss on Severus' smirking lips, James departed to the changing rooms. "I want to see you in the stands," he called over his shoulder. "Eyes on me."

...

Sirius Black weaved himself into the mass crowd of students and teachers inconspicuously, ignoring their triumphant roars as they followed the quaffle through the air, eyes wide.

His mind was not on quidditch today. He was far too distracted with the task of tracking down a certain dark haired Slytherin. He'd heard enough the previous night, between Remus and James, to know that, in some way or another, Snape had bewitched James' mind with sinister dark magic. Sirius had no idea how, or even if there was a cure, but in cursing Severus to high heaven, he hoped to make progress.

He couldn't allow James to make a fool of himself. If Remus was in on their ridiculous plan, then he'd save James alone. Peter could hardly be trusted with such a delicate subject.

Climbing higher and higher, above the mass crowds, he found himself at the highest possible stall, currently unoccupied. It was not surprising as it practically brushed the clouds, the wind sharp. Shivering in the declining heat, Sirius scanned the crowds beneath him with narrowed eyes.

"Sirius?"

Turning sharply, Sirius found the stalls less empty than he'd first thought. Sat in the corner, red hair remaining miraculously elegant while it flew in every direction, Lily's lips were pulled down into a

miserable expression.

Frowning gently in confusion, she took her half-hearted gaze from the game to tuck her feet neatly beneath her, gazing at Sirius curiously.

"What are you doing down here? You're normally at the center of all... that," she glanced beneath them with a wistful smile, as if the carefree nature of the fans was a mood she longed for. "Not cheering him on?"

"Him?"

Lily gestured towards the sky with her thumb, where a lone figure circled the stadium in search of the snitch.

"James has more than enough fans. I fancied a change of scenery," Sirius shrugged, throwing her a suggestive wink. Deliberately, he let his eyes travel the length of her leg, smooth, lightly freckled skin, modestly on display beneath the semi-transparency of her summer skirt.

Lily merely rolled her eyes, pulling the material further down her knees and gesturing to the seat beside her.

Sirius smiled playfully and complied. "What are you doing up here?" he asked, subconsciously following James with his eyes, just as Lily was, his attention drawn to the sky before them.

"Same reason, I suppose," Lily muttered.

A strangely comforting silence fell between them. Lily was acutely aware of the figure beside her, despite her fixation with one player in particular. James it seemed had given her up for good. She'd held significant hope that, before the week was out, he would have returned to her, with a playful smirk on his face and a long awaited kiss of apology. But he hadn't. And, worst of all, he didn't even seem to be suffering for it.

In fact, Lily could not remember a time when James had seemed more at peace with himself. It was irrational for her to feel so insanely jealous over James' other girl, when she was obviously making him so happy.

Lily sighed, dragging her eyes from the quidditch player to Sirius' handsome form beside her. So James Potter had found love at last. It was bound to happen. She was a fool to wait so long, and allow him to slip between her fingers. But Sirius... She'd heard no different than the usual string of broken hearts left in his wake.

Even though his eyes were screwed up in concentration, his face tense, Sirius was still ridiculously good looking. More than James, at least in the conventional way. Strange how she had never considered any potential attraction towards him before.

Checking to ensure he was focused on the game, she traced the silky strands of his hair, a strange impulse to reach out and touch it causing her hand to fist in her lap. It held a grace James' never would. Sirius' cheekbones were also higher and more pronounced. His manner held an easy charm, of someone who was very comfortable with themselves and always knew exactly what he wanted.

Perhaps she had chosen the wrong marauder. If she couldn't have James, maybe Sirius-

Sirius jumped up when Lily placed a hand on his thigh, squeezing gently at a point way too close to his crotch. Swallowing sharply, he brushed down his trousers and eyed her a mix of shock and caution. "Evans..."

"Bugger..." she cursed, scrambling to her feet. "I'm so sorry. Oh god...What's wrong with me?" she groaned. "I just...I was thinking about James."

Sirius eyed her dejected form with suspicion. "You hate James. Everyone knows that."

"Of course I don't hate him, even if he was, and remains, a complete arse," Lily argued impatiently. "Who doesn't love James Potter?"

"Then why are you touching me up, woman?" Sirius cried, feeling as though he'd betrayed James in some way, even though he was entirely innocent. "I get more than enough action to know when someone's making a move. That was a come on."

Lily's dropped back into her seat as her head fell into her hands. Despite her noble attempts to retain it, a weak sob escaped her.

Sirius, confused, dropped back into his seat beside her. Tentatively, he reached out to pull her hands from her face.

Lily reluctantly raised her eyes to Sirius' strangely compassionate gaze and smiled ruefully. "Pathetic, aren't I? All week I've been like this."

Unable to fathom an appropriate response, Sirius merely nodded, watching her closely. As Lily composed herself, Sirius' mind was busy collecting all of this information together. Her misplaced gesture had provided just the inspiration he'd been looking for. There was one way to prize James from Severus' lethal grasp. Lily Potter. But only if he could persuade her to co-operate.

If James still refused to see reason, which seemed unlikely, Sirius would just have to carry on the plan without him and humiliate Severus himself, bringing their relationship into the open in the most brutal way possible, making sure Severus knew of James' true intentions.

Either way, he had to do this for his best friend. James would lose all credibility he had gained during his popular years and would eventually regret his serious lack of judgment. Sirius would be quite willing to accept a full apology when that day dawned.

"James doesn't want me."

Sirius frowned, perplexed. "Impossible-"

"That's what I thought. With the way he's been hounding me for the last few years, I thought his feelings would be slightly more... consistent. I told him how I felt...But I think James has other things on his mind at the moment. Or more likely other people."

Sirius narrowed his eyes with a shrewd expression. "How much do you know?" he asked quietly.

"Know about what?"

A plan rapidly formed in Sirius' mind and before he knew it he was blurting out, "Go to the Ball with me."

"What?" Lily's eyebrows rose with bewilderment.

Sirius repeated himself, slower this time and with more deliberation. "Please," he added as an afterthought.

"Er...no offense," Lily began awkwardly, taking a hesitant step back, "but when I touched you

before, it was a mistake. James was always the one I liked. I hadn't given much thought to pursuing anyone else. Not that you're not attractive."

"Not like that you fool," Sirius rolled his eyes. "Not me and you...sincerely. That's just wrong...on so many levels. Not that you're not attractive. You are, but I've always seen you as Prong's girl!"

"Sirius, it's ok, I get it!" Lily waved her hands, laughing weakly. "Why do you want to go with me?"

He sighed, watching her cautiously. "To make James jealous. It will work to both our benefits. James will pull his head out of the clouds and realise what he's sacrificing in keeping Sn...his new lover. Me as a friend and you as..."

"A girlfriend... I get it, but do you know who it? His mystery lover?"

Sirius shrugged, unwilling to divest this particular information unless it swayed his chances of getting the redhead to co-operate. She and Severus were friends after all. She would, foolish as she was, undoubtedly put his happiness first.

Lily sighed. "You're worse than Potter. Not even he would sink as low as to..."

"Look, do you want James or not?" Sirius demanded, growing impatient.

"Yes, of course, but..."

"Good, because I want my friend back and unless you can think of a better way to convince him..."

"What's so wrong with his current partner?" Lily shook her head. "Surely you want what's best for him? James seemed pretty set the other day. He knew what he wanted."

"Let's just say this...person he's got himself involved with, is not a nice piece of work. Think of it as a rescue mission."

"Another bimbo?" Lily sighed.

Sirius cringed. "Worse. Much worse."

Silence fell between them. Sirius held his breath as he awaited her answer, crossing his fingers tightly.

"Fine," Lily agreed at last, eyes darkening as they followed James back and forth. "I'll do it. What do we have to lose?"

Sirius smirked, unclasping his hands in relief. "Then it's a deal. Pick you up at eight? And you better dress good, Evans. I've had girls throwing themselves at my feet all week with declarations of love. You better not disappoint."

...

"Severus..." James began slowly, as he slipped off his muddy, sweat filled boots with a grimace. "Earlier, why were you hanging about by the forest? The quidditch pitch isn't in that direction."

Leaning against a set of lockers, Severus gave a tense smile. "I am aware."

"Then why are you..."

"Because I didn't want to go."

"But I've seen you at matches before," James argued, voice muffled as he pulled his shirt over his head. "You seemed willing enough then."

"I have not attended matches for...a while," Severus confessed guiltily, wondering whether, as he was officially James' boyfriend, he was allowed to openly watch him get changed.

"But you used to," James insisted, taking a deliberate step forwards with rare expression of seriousness. Shirtless, with his trousers hung low on his hips, he was oblivious of Severus' valiant attempts not to glance beyond head height. "You're not going to try and slip out of the Ball tomorrow as well, are you?"

"No," Severus replied uneasily. "I swore I would come."

James nodded to himself, apparently satisfied. Smiling suddenly in nostalgia, he gestured towards Severus with a clean sock. "Last year, you came to every quidditch match. I don't know how I remember that, but I do. You stood right under the commentators box... Unless I was imagining it. Was I?"

Unable to see any benefit from lying, Severus shook his head. He had always loved to watch James fly. His raging jealousy and resentment of the rare talent could be matched only by his honest appreciation of the Gryffindor's elegant, skillful form.

"You never even cheered when Slytherin scored a goal," James mused, dirty socks following his boots. "But when I looked to see your reaction when I'd won, you were gone. Not like today. I could see your scowl from the clouds. Why did you stop coming to matches?"

Swallowing thickly as, inch by inch, more bare flesh assaulted his vision, Severus turned his head away and answered to the wall. "After your... friends used it as an opportunity to humiliate me. There was...one particular memory, involving my...bare buttocks."

James winced, automatically striding over to Severus and waffling ungraciously through an apology. He was glad that the remainder of the Gryffindor team had evaporated, leaving Severus to slip his way in and reluctantly congratulate their captain on yet another victory. If anyone could see him now, he'd look a fool.

James' pathetic attempt at asking for forgiveness did not bring Severus the satisfaction it may once have done. Mildly irritated, he waved his hand impatiently and James fell silent.

"It is...water under the bridge."

A slow smile spread across James' face. A question he'd been meaning to ask Severus for some time burned on his tongue, desperate to be spoken. 'Do you love me,' James begged himself to say. And then it would be over. He could relax and truly put the past under the bridge, and move on without such a tremendous weight of guilt.

"Severus, since when did you get so...articulate?" he said instead, dodging stealthily round the question.

He was used to mumbled phrases and bad grammar. This Severus was far more sophisticated, his dry tone full of confidence and self-awareness. His voice was rich and smooth, not how he would have expected.

"Ah, and then he blushes and ruins the moment," James smirked, brushing such serious issues to

the side to just simply enjoy the moment. The Ball would tell all, after all. "But really. You're voice is like sex."

Severus rolled his eyes, but there was a smug smirk pulling at his lips, mingled with bemusement. He was quick to refuse any notion of raising the point that he'd no idea what sex was like. James didn't need to be reminded of that, he was sure.

"Now, tell me more about those bare buttocks..."

Severus tensed visibly as James leaned forwards to gently press their lips together, in a kiss far too intimate for comfort. There was no darkness to hide in now, or heated passion filled urgency surrounding them. It was just him and James, with neither aware of how to approach an honest relationship.

"Sev..." James sighed finally, grabbing one of Severus' hands and placing it on the warm skin of his chest. When it was not instantly pulled away, James smiled and placed the other one on his toned stomach, damp with sweat. "Guess what we quidditch players do after a hard match?"

Severus swallowed, his hands itching to be pulled back, but somewhat unwilling to comply. He could feel James' muscles ripple under his fingers, and goosebumps appeared on his arms. "I would not know..."

"We shower."

Severus had no time to protest, not that he would have allowed himself to. Before he knew it, James had tugged Severus' cloak over his head, ruffling his immaculate hair. His shirt was to follow, and to Severus' immense surprise, James did not shout out in protest against the sudden appearance his frail form, bared to the stuffy air of the changing rooms.

Delicately uncrossing the arms Severus had closed over his chest, in order to hide himself, James inspected his upper torso with an unexpected silence.

He traced a scar, reaching from the line of Severus' collar bone with his palm, all the way to his hip. Another, unmistakable sign of abuse was slashed across his stomach. His back proved no better treated.

James let out a deep breath, as though he'd finally been allowed a treat he'd only previously dreamt of, even if it had turned out to be horrifically disfigured. To Severus, such an idea seemed preposterous.

He made a grab for his shirt, but James blocked his attempt with an impatient flick of his wand. The garment shot across the room, far out of Severus' desperate reach. He was now, whether he liked it or not, completely in James' hands, and entirely vulnerable.

James flicked his wand again and the door to the Gryffindor changing rooms locked with a clang. He turned back to Severus silently, raising an eyebrow for permission.

Severus swallowed, closed his eyes and nodded.

Swallowing deeply, James ran a delicate finger over Severus' protruding ribcage, unable to keep himself from wincing at the hollow stomach. The skin, however, was smoother than James ever could have imagined, and white as snow.

Severus was unwilling to watch, what he knew, would only be disappointment on James' face.

James chose to surprise him. Taking one of Severus' pale hands in his own, he kissed each one of his fingertips before lowering the palm to his crotch, where his arousal was unmistakable.

Severus opened his eyes, eyes wide as he stared at James' naked erection. When had he taken his trousers off?

Lowering his head, James smirked and latched onto a nipple, biting gently and sending shockwaves of pain and pleasure through Severus's quivering form. When James used skillful fingers to clasp at the other, Severus' grunted, trying to become accustomed to the foreign sensation.

"Sev..." James started suddenly, pulling away to glance at the marks on his lovers' skin, as though he knew they needed to be verbally acknowledged in some way, before things proceeded any further.

Although he released all other contact, he kept light hold on Severus' hand, where it rested between his legs, enjoying the presence there far too much to allow him to move.

Severus tensed, panic rushing into his eyes. Unwilling to raise the subject, or ever talk about those particular experiences. He repressed his inner demons and huffed impatiently, dragging James' head down for a kiss, effectively distracting him.

Though he was surprised at Severus' forwardness, James responded with enthusiasm. When they finally had to break apart for oxygen, James moved to dance patterns Severus' chest, chuckling quietly when his boyfriend proved extremely vocal.

When Severus jerked in response to a particular sensation, so did his hand, causing James to groan deeply. Thankfully, Severus seemed to have lost control of most of his body, and therefore, appeared almost unaware of anything other than James tongue on his skin.

Severus was sure he was harder than he'd ever been in his life. He felt dizzy, light-headed, completely overwhelmed.

When he felt his wrist grabbed in a tight grip, guided more firmly against James' swelling erection and used for the Gryffindor to stroke himself with, Severus went weak at the knees. Gasping raggedly, he collapsed onto the bench beneath him, breathing heavily.

Panting just as much, James rested his head against the locker, shaking his head at himself. "Sorry, Sev. Shouldn't have pushed. It was my fault...Too much too fast..."

He trailed off as Severus, taking a deep breath, his eyes dark with arousal and determination, tugged James onto the bench beside him and continued the path his lover had started. His hands shook almost uncontrollably as he nudged James legs apart to access his groin.

"Severus, you don't ha-"

"Quiet," Severus muttered, his heated gaze, filled with tension, flickering to James' face in desperation. "Please. I want to... learn."

James felt his breath catch, his heart suddenly pounding painfully in his chest as he watched, wide eyed, as Severus crouched down in front of him.

"Severus...do you know what you're doing? Have you...ah..." James' hips bucked as Severus squeezed experimentally, his eyes darker than James had ever seen them.

"Like that?" Severus asked, in such a timid tone that James felt himself flush from head to toe in

arousal.

"Just like that," he nodded breathlessly. He couldn't help it, he had to push Severus for more. It was just too good. Laying his hand on his lap, he pushed the boy's hand roughly and persuaded Severus into movement.

With a soft groan, James arched up, Severus' hand tightening around him as the boy grew in confidence. Surrendering himself to Severus' ministrations, James allowed the Slytherin to experiment and indeed learn. His knuckles turned white as he clamped onto the bench beneath him, begging himself not to give in and interfere as he helplessly jerked under Severus' exploration.

Black eyes were piercing his very soul as Severus soaked up his every twitch, every flash of pleasure ... Never before had James seen Severus pay such attention to a task, aside from his potions. He was regarding James with such awe...such adoration, that James felt almost self-conscious.

It was not a perfect hand job. Severus slowed down at the wrong time and squeezed inappropriately or often too hard, but James had never come so spectacularly.

Slumping back, his breathing gradually evened and he glanced up through hooded eyes to see Severus staring at him, never having once looked away from his face. Though James was quickly going soft in his lap, Severus' hand covered in the sticky substance, Severus continued to stare at him, as though in a haze, with some unfathomable expression. It was almost as though he were afraid to see the result of his own actions.

James glanced down at the Slytherin's own largely tented trousers and made a decision. He would not explain this. He wouldn't spell it out and taint it. He would show Severus what he'd just done for him.

Severus didn't know whether he was more deeply afraid or exhilarated, as James tugged him from the bench, but his mind seemed to have been made up for him. James grabbed a couple of towels and dragged him insistently towards the showers.

Severus was surprised when instead of insisting on furthering his arousal, James flicked on the warm water and reached for the soap and smothered Severus' back in it. He massaged the smaller boy's frail shoulders, along the sharp ridges of his back, to his skinny hips.

"Severus..." James began but Severus was already nodding. He unzipped his now-soaked trousers himself and yanked them down.

"Are you-"

"I'm ready," Severus insisted. He could wait no longer. His trust in James was complete. There was no turning back now.

James swallowed heavily and helped Severus out of his boxers. James held Severus' gaze, eyes wide but the Slytherin had a small knowing smirk on his face. James was afraid to look down, for the first time in his teenage life. Severus had frozen him. His heart was beating so fast it was almost painful.

James frowned in defiance, reaching down instead and taking Severus in his hand. The boy was smaller than him, considerably so, but James barely registered this as he watched Severus' face contort with pleasure as he stroked him.

He kissed Severus roughly, pushing their naked bodies together and groaning loudly at the contact.

Severus jerked away from his mouth far too soon for James' liking, biting instead hard on his shoulder as he came between James' legs.

Severus gasped, breathing heavily. "Sorry I-"

James smiled. He should have predicted the shortness of their first attempt. "Shut up," he muttered, moving back so that the water could clean them both. He watched Severus appreciatively, soap and water pooling at the creases in the frail body.

"I'm not in a rush, are you?" he smiled, eyes dark.

Severus' face smoothed into a genuine smile. He snatched the soap from James' hand and nudged the other boy around. No, he was in no rush.

## Chapter 15

A restless air of excitement clung to the castle with the approach of dawn. All four houses roused uncharacteristically early to prepare for the Ball, much to the exasperation of their teachers.

Quickly defeated, the staff relented to leaving the helplessly hyperactive children to their own devices. On specific orders from Dumbledore, they were already rushed off their feet, placing decorations, arranging last minute entertainment and conducting extensive security measures.

The House Cup had been awarded the previous night, as the entire school enjoyed a noisy end of year feast. On conclusion of the Ball, the following day promised only hangover relievers and an early train back to the muggle world.

Severus was unfortunate enough to find himself rudely awakened from his own fitful nights sleep. Wincing in disgust, he dragged his pillow further over his head until the tide of high pitched screaming was dimmed to a muffled echo. His sleepy features hardened to a scowl as he cursed the infernal children who had woken him at such an hour.

Closing his eyes tightly, he allowed himself to slip back into a lethargic state, where he longingly imagined himself at a more preferable location... A shower. Wet, slippery hands were running all over his body, probing, wandering... dipping into curves and exploring expanses of hollow skin... arousing him beyond comprehension. Bucking, gasping, jerking, he had never experienced such glorious sensation.

Lips twitching at the fond memory, Severus reveled in the aches of his body, centered around his weary groin. He remembered that he had come that day, quite vocally, more times than he could account for...

Severus snapped his eyes open with the unmistakable sound of scuffling feet, barely audible through the thin stone wall that separated him from the outside corridor. Disturbed from the erotic memory of his last encounter with James, he could only pray that his excitable Slytherin peers scarpered past quickly and did not stumble across his secret hideout.

He was sure he imagined it, but he could sense the ceiling rattling above him, which only added to the sense of utter chaos in the upper levels of the castle. He was tempted to remind each and every student, with harsh acidity, that the Ball was merely a party. It was a predictable, annual event that hardly warranted such hysteria.

But even Severus knew that wasn't true. The Ball was a extravaganza... It was a night of endless loud music, mayhem and unrestrained rule breaking...

Reluctantly dragging his pillow from his face, he threw aside his duvet and padded across to his bathroom, where he met his own tired eyes in the mirror. He looked especially scrawny and pale in his dirty white t-shirt and baggy pajama bottoms. It was still hard to believe that not that many hours ago, another had caressed such a bony, spoiled carcass with open affection.

Severus smiled vaguely and turned from the sight to aggressively brush his teeth, not stopping until his spit turned a satisfying red. James may appreciate his body, but he doubted he ever would.

He was in deep conflict. Tonight would have been the night he'd have exposed James Potter for what he really was. But what was he really? Was he everything Severus thought he was? Probably, he thought... But now that he was his, none of it seemed to matter.

It seemed such a long time ago he'd sworn that oath to himself.

Voldemort was a dark beacon calling to him and James Potter was a path of light and... confusion. He knew where he belonged, but where he wanted to be was a very different place.

Severus lowered his eyes from his own intense gaze and winced. Inside, he was screaming that he was a fool. That he should, on this rare occasion, be optimistic, drop his dark attachments and throw his hopes into James Potter and all of the security that he offered.

But there was an anger in Severus, combined with a deep bitterness and a desperate need to prove himself. It could not be ignored.

Tonight would be a turning point in his life. He'd always known he was made for greater things than his current, hopeless existence had suggested. He was not a punch bag. He was not scum. He was a Slytherin and he had uses - skills that would be proven. It was not impossible for him to be happy. Such hope was a rarity for Severus, but now he had it, he'd die before letting it go. He would die before he let James go...

"Love..." he sneered to himself, admitting now the hopelessness of his situation. "Who would have thought Severus? Your greatest weakness."

Severus started when the plank of wood guarding his hideout crashed aside. His toothbrush clattered into the sink as a pair of black clad legs swung awkwardly out of the gap and dropped to the floor.

"Lily?"

Severus gaped at the redhead as she poked her head round the bathroom door, smiling nervously.

"Morning. I wasn't sure whether you'd be awake. I hope I'm not intruding..."

"Not at all." Severus forced a smile, grabbing a jumper from a pile of clothes on his dresser and pulling it over his head, uncomfortable with displaying any part of his body, even if it was only his bare arms.

Stifling a yawn, he beckoned his unexpected guest into the sitting area, where he flicked on the kettle and slumped onto the couch. With a casual flick of his wand, the lights he'd dimmed for the evening brightened, revealing Lily's pale, tired face for his inspection.

Loitering uncertainly before him, Lily appeared uncharacteristically tense. For a moment, they simply stared at each other, memorising the details of the others face, as though they had been apart for weeks, not days.

"I know I'm going to sound awfully predictable but... I've missed you," Lily stated finally, clasping her hands together in a suspiciously nervous gesture. It appeared she wished to say more, but was somewhat unable.

Severus acknowledged the sentiment with a short nod, eyeing her carefully. "What are you doing here?"

Lily took the seat opposite him, her gaze softening. "I came to see you. I thought that was obvious since we haven't spoken since... well, you know when. That was...awkward. I suppose I should tell you, James turned me down."

Feigning ignorance, Severus raised an eyebrow. "How... unexpected."

"Hmm.." Lily agreed sadly. "It seems he has currently other... interests." Lowering her gaze, she falsely projected indifference as she twisted the sleeve of her jumper through shaking fingers. "You don't happen to know who he's seeing... do you? I mean, if you could just give me a name..."

"I..." Severus swallowed. Eyeing Lily through a blank mask, he considered taking pity on her. Perhaps, after all that she had done for him, she deserved to know the truth.

But then again Slytherin's were not known for their bravery, nor their selflessness and Severus saw no benefit from confessing his sins when it would only cost him a very dear friendship. He would need Lily, after all, as an anchor back to reality, when James finally came to his senses and found a suitable young lady to replace him.

Lily glanced up, naively hopeful, but Severus shook his head.

"Kettle's boiling," he pointed out, clearing his throat and gliding towards the sink.

Lily, having known Severus' strange character for a while, was not disconcerted by his abruptness and blatant avoidance of the question. Instead, she sighed and continued attacking her sleeve.

"I haven't been to this place for so long..." she mused quietly, as Severus filled two cups with steaming liquid. "I kind of missed it. Rumour has it that you hardly ever sleep in the Slytherin dorms anymore."

"Is that so?" Severus muttered absently over his shoulder.

"Yes," Lily confirmed. "I don't know what you did to those poor boys in your dorm. When I asked one of them if you were in, he seemed remarkably glad that you weren't. Hoped you were dead, he said... He was quite awful."

Severus merely grunted in response, shoving tea into her hand. He settled opposite her, his mind somewhere in the back of his wardrobe, with his tuxedo.

However, the distraction of the Ball did not decrease his discomfort with Lily appearing so comfortable in what Severus had come to refer to as 'James' chair.' For an abrupt moment, he considered shoving her bodily from it.

He was irrationally uncomfortable with having her in the same space he and James had spent such life changing hours, getting to know each other as best they could in the circumstances. What he once wouldn't have given to have Lily deign to stay the night. Now all he could think about was James, and what he was doing at this current time.

The moment past and he glanced away, wondering when his longing to be near James had turned into a constant ache.

...

"It's too loose, Remus!"

"What are you talking about? It's absolutely fine! Any tighter, and you won't be able to breathe, let alone dance."

"I don't care," James huffed, twisting to appreciatively eye his rear in the mirror. "My arse looks way better when I can barely move."

"And how will you dance, hm?" Remus snapped irritably, running his wand along the outer seam

of James' trousers in order to loosen their death like grip. "Are you intending for Severus to find a different partner tonight? Perhaps Peter will waltz with him."

Arms crossed over his chest, Sirius watched his friends squabble, his dark eyes unreadable. Any lingering affection evident in his guarded expression, as he watched the familiar scene, was swiftly blackened with Severus' name. He'd hoped James would've reconsidered his actions by now, with the Ball merely hours away, but it seemed his friend was set on making a fool of himself.

Without saying a word, he slipped from the bed, grabbing his own suit from its immaculate position in the wardrobe. He strode from the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Ignore him," Remus commanded, forcing James' face round with his palm as he shot an anxious glance towards the door. Smoothing down James' shirt, he gave a weak smile. "We need to get you ready."

...

"No, Sev, I think the blue tie looks better," Lily suggested thoughtfully, as she finally persuaded Severus to reveal his outfit for the evening. "They go so nicely with your trousers-"

"I prefer the green," Severus differed firmly, snatching the garment and slinging it around his neck with assertion.

Lily appeared taken aback for a moment, but then she smiled at his surety. "So, this is what you'll look like tonight?" She eyed him with appraisal. "Oh, Sev...I can't wait to meet her. You're not the only one with a mystery lover I'm waiting to see tonight. And I... Well I guess you'll see who I'm going with later."

Severus made to speak but Lily cut him off, caught up in a moment of bright enthusiasm.

"You're so much more confident now. And you've put on weight. I'm sure you have, or perhaps you're just growing," she smiled approvingly. "I've been...distracted lately. I intended to sneakily find out the identity of your other half, but I guess tonight will be the night. She's obviously done wonders for you."

Reaching forwards, Lily affectionately brushed a strand of hair from Severus' forehead, tracing his bagged eyes with a delicate finger.

"See... You're not even flinching..." Lily whispered in wonder.

A crash startled them both and they spun round in surprise.

"Oh my..." Lily clapped her hands to her mouth. "Professor, you scared me..."

"I am sorry, Miss. Evans," Dumbledore smiled kindly, steadying the girl with a brief hand to her shoulder. "It was not my intention."

Severus frowned, torn between confusion and alarm. Recovering with Slytherin haste, he schooled his features and bowed his head towards the older man. "Headmaster."

"Good morning, Severus," Dumbledore returned carelessly, giving the boy a warm smile. "All prepared for the Ball? I must say, you look most... dashing. That tie is marvelous."

Severus blushed a deep red, glancing down at himself and stuttering incoherently.

Dumbledore took pity on him, taking a step further inside the room, head bowed so as not to bump against the ceiling. "Sit down, my boy. Lily, if you don't mind, I'd like a word with Mr. Snape. Just a quick one. If you wouldn't mind stepping outside?"

Lily nodded, casting her friend a curious glance. "Of course."

Severus watched Lily go, swallowing back nerves and a brief flicker of irritation as Dumbledore immediately took control in a location Severus considered to be solely his, and most private.

"Have I misbehaved, Headmaster?" he asked quietly, wondering whether his involvement with James was to be punished.

"No," Dumbledore shook his head gently. "I just... wanted to ask you a question. That's all. I'm afraid, despite your attempts at secrecy, I've been aware of this clever little room for quite some time. I confess, I took this opportunity to witness it for myself."

Severus could only stare. Before he could restrain himself, he was shifting forwards with a disapproving frown. "How?" he snapped.

"That is of no matter," Dumbledore explained calmly, unperturbed. He finally took a seat opposite Severus, looking entirely out of place. "Now tell me, do you intend to go to the Ball with anyone tonight?"

Severus' eyes widened, his face contorting in a pained expression. "What are - How do you-"

"Just a question, my boy. No need to be alarmed," Dumbledore smiled encouragingly. "A simple yes or no shall suffice."

Unwilling to commit to either with such verbal confirmation, Severus could only nod weakly, eyes rising to the ceiling to avoid direct contact.

Dumbledore seemed disturbed by this, but he said no more on the matter. "Just one more question. Then I shall leave you be."

Severus nodded silently, puzzled but unwilling to voice it.

"Forgive the privacy of what I shall ask you, Severus...but it is imperative that I know. Are you in love?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

Severus stiffened immediately, eyes flying to the Headmaster's face with an array of mixed emotions. When he found his voice, he spluttered his outrage, thrown by the unexpected question.

"It is extremely important that I know," Dumbledore repeated quietly. "You could merely nod..."

Lips tightening, Severus knew from the moment he felt a brush against the inside of his mind, that Dumbledore had found his answer. Staring at him intently, Severus silently defied him the opportunity to question the response that had already been stolen from him.

...

James had to sprint when he was called into Dumbledore's office at ten to eight. If he was late for the Ball, Severus would never forgive him. Ear splitting music was already wracking his bones as the party got into full swing.

Ducking under a ring of bright yellow balloons, he only had to knock once before the door was

wrenched open. Quite sternly, James was pointed to a chair opposite the uncharacteristically stern Headmaster.

When neither spoke for quite some time, James finally gathered the courage to speak. "I don't know wha-"

"Oh, I think you know exactly why you are here," Dumbledore counteracted gravely. "I believe you led me to believe, under oath, that you would release Severus from-"

"I love him," James whispered hoarsely, before Dumbledore could say another word. Momentarily surprised by his own bluntness, James blinked. He could barely hear over the thudding of his own heart. "I do. I probably should have told you before but... I wanted to be sure. You have to believe... My intentions have... changed."

A flicker of deep surprise passed over Dumbledore's face, as he stared intently at the student before him. "Is that so?" It wasn't until quite some time later, when the silence between them had reached all measures of depths, that he allowed a gentle smile. "Thank you," said simply, inclining his head in a brief nod.

James glanced up hesitantly. When his gaze met the older man's, he realised all of the implications behind that small statement and smiled weakly. He had been forgiven.

"I promised myself that I would allow you a generous measure of independence in resolving this small... hiccup of yours, James," Dumbledore continued gently. "I believed you must see the error of your ways alone. Quite boldly I believe, I put my trust in you. While I had hoped you'd realise that your actions were wrong, almost to the point of utter cruelty, I never assumed that..." The man broke off, humming gently.

James' face flushed. "I never intended it to be more... I gained a conscience, professor. Even if I hadn't... developed feeling for Severus, I'd still have aborted the plan."

Dumbledore nodded in solemn agreement. "Lily Evans no longer holds your attention?" he asked seriously. "You have always been quite infatuated with her. A beautiful girl, I must say. You no longer think so?"

This question composed so many differing, contrasting responses that James could only cautiously shake his head. "So it would seem."

Leaning forward, Dumbledore's gaze was piercing. "You understand that I must offer caution, James. No, look at me now. You shall not find the answer in your lap. If you wish to follow a path of companionship with a man like Severus-"

"I do."

"Then you are a brave man indeed."

James remained silent.

With a series of thoughtful blinks, Dumbledore's eyes gradually twinkled, until they were dancing merrily behind half moon spectacles. "And I must say... a lucky one also." He waved his hand through the air dismissively, a gentle smile gracing his lips. "Do what you must."

James swallowed. He was in the presence of the wisest man in the country. He'd be a fool not to ask his advice. "Do you think I'm crazy, professor? Taking him to the Ball?"

Dumbledore sighed. "If your intentions are noble then you have my blessing... but it shall not be easy. On either of you. Are you ready to give up popularity, James? The devotion of your best friend? If this is the path you choose, you shall be isolating yourself considerably. And if your relationship with young Severus is not to last... you could be in a spot of bother come next term."

James frowned, nerves twisting in his stomach. "I know its a risk... but I have to do it. I have to show him I care. And I have to complete the bet... I can deal with whatever comes later."

Dumbledore stared at him for a long while, and then nodded. "You are searching for redemption, James."

"I-"

"You are taking rather extreme measures to get it but..." he stared a moment longer and then his face cleared. "Go on my boy. The festivities await you."

As James reached the door, he hesitated. He glanced over his shoulder, meeting Dumbledore's light gaze with a brief smile. "Should I tell him?"

"Of your previous intention to humiliate the poor fellow?" Dumbledore sighed. "I believe it to be inevitable. Guilt, I am afraid, is as solid an emotion as regret. It shall only fester if you do not allow it space to breath."

With a short nod, James stepped from the room, a cold sweat sweeping through him.

...

Severus had never felt more awkward in his life as he lingered by the punch bowel, couples twirling and cantering tight circles around him. Glaring in open protest of their youthful, carefree enjoyment, he found himself consuming the spiked drink by the goblet full.

As he'd predicted would happen, the Ball was well underway and his date was rather inconveniently absent. As a result, he felt nothing less than a naive fool and completely out of place.

Even worse than the strange glances he'd expected to endure at being present to such a social event, was the complete indifference in which he was being treated. No one seemed to have time for him, even to scowl or make a joke at his expense. Everyone was having a great time. Except for him.

Severus twisted his shiny, emerald tie in shaking fingers, planning to scarper at the closest possible opportunity. Either that, or slowly get very, very drunk.

Rapidly sinking into a depression, Severus barely took notice when the entire hall quietened to a hush, all heads craned in one direction with matching expressions of awe.

When he could ignore the obvious disruption to the atmosphere no longer, Severus slowly raised his eyes from the cup in his hand to the open doorway. Already being pressed into the nearest wall on all sides, a dark figure was barely distinguishable, silhouetted against the arched, highly decorated entrance.

When the boy stepped forward, a hand raised in a polite, but firm request for a moments space, Severus had to swallow a strangled gasp. Not even his cynicism, that sneered at how absolutely unoriginal his lover had planned his entrance, could compete with the admiration that had slackened his jaw.

James Potter had cast upon himself a grace, an absolute beauty that made his everyday rumpled appearance almost laughable in comparison. He was a sight to behold. Whistles rang out, mixed with frequent enthusiastic cheers of approval.

Swallowing sharply, Severus watched as James took a deliberate, confident step aside from the crowds, scanning across the rows of faces. Each head rose a little higher, smiles plastered in place as the students awaited his selection.

Severus suddenly became very aware of his own body... The tightness of his trousers... His hair, where it had been clasped back for the first time in his entire life, displaying prominent cheekbones... His open necked shirt... The flower in his breast pocket... He found all at once that his throat had become unbearably restricted and he felt light headed, unable to move an inch.

As much as he despised being reduced to an uncanny reflection to all those around him - weak kneed, furiously blushing and undeniably desperate - there was something to be said for the pure force of presence being emitted from Gryffindor's most popular star.

After an eternity, James' eyes found his, and the boy made a direct path towards him.

Severus gulped, unconsciously moistening his lips. In contrast, James' eyes were fierce, determined... but also equally as fearful.

James was stopped on numerous occasions as he crossed the great expanse of floor, many voices of which held considerable confusion. 'Where is your date?' 'Why are you alone?' 'Want to dance with me?' They were all like poison to Severus' ears.

James came to a smooth halt before Severus, bringing extra life to the dark corner which had previously held but one lonely occupant, a dark eyebrow gently raised in greeting.

"Care to dance?" he asked calmly, though loud enough for all perked ears to hear.

Surprise flashed across Severus' face, as though he'd never been expecting such an offer, despite numerous promises. He made to answer, but found his voice box had unloyally deserted him, along with most of the moisture in his mouth.

James was grinning down at him, the multicolour lights from the ceiling casting haphazard patterns across his face and shoulders. "Please," he added quietly.

Regaining his bearings, Severus forced a scowl on his face, taking comfort in its familiarity. Reverting to a defensive pose in order to conceal his extreme anxiety was a habit of which he'd grown extremely fond.

"You're late," he stated bluntly, turning away but a hand closed firmly around his wrist. He ignored the small thrill that shot down his spine as they made physical contact, in an intimate gesture, for the first time in public eye.

"Yes, I know," James explained, eyes raking across Severus' strained face. Smiling nervously, he briefly lowered his gaze to eye Severus' attire with high appraisal. "Dumbledore held me up. Listen, there's something I need to tell you before-"

"Hey! Is that James Potter with Snape?"

"Over here, Potter! Have you lost your glasses?"

"What in Merlin's name is he doing?"

"He's lost his mind!"

James grimaced, as shouts began to echo around them.

"He's gonna hex his pants off!"

"Bastards," James muttered dismissively, without looking round, though with enough venom to make Severus cringe. "Come on." He tugged Severus' hand, firmly leading him through the crowds towards the dance floor.

Severus winced against the bright lights, as streams of colour filtered across his face. He could not make out any faces, temporarily blinded by the dazzling intensity of the enchanted ceiling.

When they were right in the center, James turned to Severus with a gentle, albeit tense smile. He held out a hand and pulled their bodies together into a slow dance, automatically following the beat of the music.

"Look at me," James instructed gently, prying Severus' face toward him. Ensuring he held eye-contact, he kept a tight hold in case Severus' better instincts got the better of him and he ran. "Do you trust me?"

Severus nodded slowly.

"Then there's nothing to be worried about. No one's going to touch you--"

"Potter's gay!"

"You're not going to be hurt." James flicked his wand sharply as a boy from Hufflepuff made to pull at the back of Severus' shirt. He stumbled back with the force of the spell.

"You look... gorgeous," James muttered sensually, without missing a beat, squeezing Severus' shoulder in encouragement.

Severus shivered. "Nothing on you," he returned quietly, before he could refrain himself from such sentimentality, already feeling dizzy with excitement at the thought of getting James out of his impossibly tight tux. He looked more edible than Severus had ever seen him, though never more unattainable. If James was ever to be taken from him, it would be tonight. The Gryffindor could have any witch or wizard of his choosing.

They swayed for a few more moments, the tension slowly easing from Severus' body as the jostling of the crowds around them, with their noisy confusion and disapproval, were dimmed by the music.

Pressed up against James' chest, Severus could almost pretend the crowds didn't exist. For a daring moment, he allowed himself to feel smug with the thought that he alone had James' attention. He was dancing with him, in full view of everybody. He wasn't ashamed of him.

Severus lifted his head from James' shoulder with a shaky sigh, brushing his face alongside the bottom of James' jaw. "What were you going to tell me?"

"It doesn't matter," James answered immediately, drawing Severus closer into the circle of his arms. He could not bear to disrupt the sudden calmness that had come over Severus. He'd expected a far greater protest when dragging him out to the dance floor. Dumbledore hadn't said precisely when he'd have to come clean, after all. "Not anymore."

When a more upbeat song began to play, James pulled back an inch and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no you don't, Potter," Severus warned, face flushing. His previous anxieties returned, as he was brought back to reality with an unwelcome jolt. "I do not- release me!"

James merely grinned, pushing Severus away from him before tugging him back, leading the stoic boy in an attempt at a fast- paced dance. Ignoring the now gawping crowds, James bowed his head and spoke privately into Severus' ear as the boy stood, frozen with awkwardness. "You never told me you could dance.'

Severus reddened uncontrollably, his shoulders tense and his legs locked together. "Fuck off, Potter."

James chuckled quietly, linking their hands as he brought their faces close, before Severus could compose any further scathing remarks. "One night, Sev. That's all I'm asking. Then we can keep any displays of affection and awful dancing behind closed doors. If that's how you want it. As long as I get to pinch your bum in public...That I insist on."

Snorting ungraciously, Severus squeezed hard at James' hipbone, where his palms had come to rest, wondering how an earth he'd been persuaded into such an act. With extreme unease, he mimicked James' steps, somewhat unable to take on natural movement, remaining robotic and visibly uncomfortable.

"Perhaps we should have practised this before, hm?" James remarked, wincing in pain as Severus stepped hard on his foot for the third time. It hadn't taken that long to determine that while Severus was graceful in many aspects of his persona, dancing was not in his forte.

Severus swore in frustration, making to pull away but James held him tight. "It's no matter," he assured him. "Just keep moving."

"People are staring," Severus muttered, cheeks flaming. "I do not appreciate appearing a fool, Potter-"

"Yes, I know," James agreed. "And it's James if you don't mind. I'm not my father."

When Severus continued to mutter uncomfortably into his robes, obviously fighting the natural instinct to flee, James slowed down his movements with a sigh. "Yes, they're staring. Just like we knew they would. You're ok, Severus. You're doing fine."

Severus glanced at him apprehensively and James gave him a small, encouraging smile. "Swing those hips."

"James," Severus moaned, willing his lover to appreciate his discomfort. "Don't do this to me... I can't...I want... but I don't-"

James quietened his protests with a small shake of the head, unwilling to stop. He'd never regain the courage to continue what he'd started. "You promised me, Sev. Get that confidence together, because I'm going to kiss you in a minute. Then they'll really have something to look at."

James willed Severus to share in his assertion and ignore the exclamations from around them, though this display was, in many ways, a show for them. While the idea of losing popularity and all carefully crafted reputation was awful, considering his life without Severus was much worse.

If he was going to lose the respect of his peers for the remainder of his school life, he may as well do it properly.

His heart was thumping against his chest painfully, blood pounding in his ears.

"This is not easy for me either," James reminded him quietly. "I have a lot more to lose than you do... This is the end of me Severus. The end of my reputation... The end of the James Potter everyone thinks they know."

Severus stared at him and then at the crowds. Realisation dawned. He'd got exactly what he wanted. He didn't even need to tell anyone he had planned all of this from the beginning. He was already publicly humiliating James Potter. He had succeeded it exactly what he wanted to do.

And now he had James as a bonus...

"You've lost everything..." Severus muttered in disbelief.

James smiled sadly. "I haven't lost you."

Severus moaned softly, burying his face against James' neck and swallowing down nervous sickness.

James breathed out slowly, scared beyond belief about what he was doing. Their movements had returned to a simple sway. He no longer cared that it was inappropriate for the song, as long as Severus stopped shaking.

He avoided making eye contact with anyone in particular as he moved them in a circle. It didn't take long for the DJ to zone in on them, until the spotlight was following their every step. As they turned, James could see the startled face of McGonagall, simply disbelieving... Dumbledore's wary gaze... Lily's open mouthed shock... Sirius' fierce defiance... Remus' quiet amusement... Peter was still searching for the marauders' leader amongst the crowds, obviously late to cotton on...

... Sirius and Lily...

James blinked, craning his neck to confirm his own eye-sight. It couldn't be... Not as a couple.

"Oh, you bastard..." he murmured venomously, his stomach suffering an uncomfortable dipping sensation as he registered his best friend's hands round Lily's slim waist.

"What?" Severus frowned, tilting his head to follow James' gaze. "Oh."

"Yeah," James agreed, scowling as Sirius met his eyes before deliberately laying his palm on Lily's bum and pinching. "Cheeky git," he hissed, turning away. "I know exactly what he's trying to do. It won't work."

"Won't it?" Severus sighed, not as easily convinced.

"No. I've made my choice. I gave up all rights over Lily when I started dating you," James nodded confidently, wishing he'd stop feeling so possessive over her. She was not his, and now never would be.

Her puzzled gaze, suitably outraged, was one that he could not meet.

Abruptly, James decided it was time end all ties to this bet he'd so foolishly agreed to, once and for all. Then he and Severus could leave this entire fiasco behind them.

James bowed his head, inhaling Severus' scent as he brushed his chin against the dark hair, trying desperately to hold onto his confidence, and convince himself he wanted this. He was doing the

right thing. He wondered if his lover could hear how fast his heart was beating.

"Ready to show the whole world how we feel?" James murmured into his hair.

Severus nodded against his chest, shaking with nerves. "As if they haven't gathered a firm idea already."

James pulled back slightly, eyeing him closely. "If you're not ready..."

"No. I am. We can hardly reverse our actions now."

"Alright. But there's a question I have to ask you first..." James begun hesitantly, unwilling to go a step further until he knew his fate. Tonight was, after all, the final deadline and if Severus didn't love him, he needed to say his goodbyes.

"This may sound a little weird... not to mention soon-" he continued hesitantly.

"Whatever is it, I am sure I can answer. I'd tell you anything," Severus said quickly, burying his face against James' neck once again in a gesture James was quickly growing ridiculously fond of. He refused to acknowledge the goosebumps that rose in response to the hot breath on his sensitive skin.

James plucked up every ounce of Gryffindor courage that he possessed and dropped his voice to a tentative whisper. "Do you love me?"

Severus froze, a deep frown etched against his forehead. "What?"

"I..." James winced, feeling an uncomfortable heat creeping up around his collar. "Trust me. It's important that I know."

Severus' mind flew back to his earlier conversation with Dumbledore, and he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Why the sudden urge for a declaration?"

"I can't explain..." James swallowed, for once unable to conceal his sheer nerves. "Just tell me. Plain and simple."

Severus looked at him for a long moment, but gradually he shook his head. "What I... feel for you is far from plain and simple. Tonight, I agreed to come here.. Nothing more. I hardly believe that I..."

"It's ok," James stopped him, briefly shutting his eyes. A cold chill had crept up his spine with Severus' lack of a positive response. He'd known asking the Slytherin outright and gaining a decisive answer had been a long shot, which meant he'd be facing the final hours of the bet blind.

"Just... forget I said anything."

Severus frowned, but nodded in agreement, his throat gradually loosening enough to allow him to breath properly once again. He attempted a tense smile, but James' eyes had grown distant and were no longer focused on him.

The next few minutes were painful for both of them, thoughts swirling doubts. Severus felt the rare need to express himself, to explain his emotions... but an inner force kept him silent.

Dispelling the silence quite abruptly, James cleared his throat. Shaking his head a little as though to clear himself of some morbid discovery, he said, quite clearly, "I love you... Severus."

Severus' eyes widened, torn between disbelief and horror, which only intensified when James continued to appear solemn, declaring no joke of the matter.

Dropping his chin, Severus avoided James' painfully tender expression. He closed his eyes sharply when the sentiment was repeated.

"Whether or not the feeling is reciprocated," James added after a moments hesitation. "And I mean that."

All Severus wished to be was cynical, but to hear those three words from a person whom he'd grown to adore, was the single greatest, most terrifying moment of his life. Not even his parents had considered him worthy of such an emotion.

"You are sure?" he asked uncertainly, while his heart leapt painfully in his chest and fought all attempts at denial.

James nodded silently, a genuine smile tugging at his lips.

"You've only known me a few short months—" he protested but James cut him off with a firm shake of the head.

"No," he argued gently. "I may have only seen the real you for a little while, but I've known you a lot longer, Severus. I singled you out from the beginning, didn't I? I've always been drawn to you, whatever my intentions. You are... hard to ignore."

After that, he gently raised Severus' chin in his fingers, without giving him time to respond. "Let me make you happy? Let me right all the wrong I've ever done by you. It won't be easy... I know I'm an arse, but I'll do my best to make you happy. All you have to do is tell me how."

Aware that he was making promises that he very well may not be able to keep, James closed his eyes before Severus' frozen expression could ruin the moment.

"Ready to kiss me now?" James asked finally, smiling wryly. "Or have I put you off for good?"

Struggling with an inner turmoil, Severus barely processed James' request. Without waiting for consent, James dragged Severus' forward with a hand, clasped at the base of his neck, and kissed him.

It wasn't long before their breath was mingled with tears. James pulled back, strangely emotional. Severus' eyes were hard and cautious, but unmistakably wet.

"If you are deceiving—"

"Never. With all that I am, or... all that I have become, I love you. You mean the world to me Severus."

Severus swallowed sharply, seeming unable to speak. When he looked up, there was more hope in his eyes than James could comprehend. For the first time in his life, James had seen Severus undeniably, selfishly, gloriously happy. The tension eased from his rigid face, his shoulders dropped and he smiled.

James found himself returning the smile automatically, giving a small laugh. "I take it that you approve?"

Severus only nodded, feeling an uncharacteristic desire to share in James' confessions. Moving

forwards, he ignored the gaping expressions of his peers and kissed James' cheek, pressing thin lips to all the skin he could reach.

James smiled, tilting his head and wrapping his arms tightly around Severus' waist, but with a glance at the clock and the sea of shocked faces, he knew the night's drama wasn't over yet.

"Forgive me, Severus, but you have to tell me," he urged, gently prying Severus away from his skin. With a new spark of hope ignited inside of him, he couldn't pass up the chance to press a little further for an answer. "I need to know... I can't explain why but... tell me. Do you... love me? Do you feel the same?"

Severus twitched, but did not move away like he so wanted to when presented with such a discomforting situation. James was not shouting, making a scene, but the music had been dimmed and his quiet voice easily carried over the crowds.

Someone shouted out an obscene comment, followed by, "Is this a joke?"

Severus blocked them all out, fearless in the circle of James' arms. Everything felt surreal. He was suspended in a dream version of reality, where he was being given the chance of a lifetime - one that was never his to claim. James loved him. Who needed Voldemort when he had such a gift. Who needed anything else. This was all he wanted now.

Growing more urgent of a response, James pressed him. "I would never leave you. Not ever. What we have can only grow. It will be hard. But I'll give it my everything. You're the one for me now. I'm a changed man because of you."

The coil of anxiety in his gut eased as Severus opened his eyes, black eyes fixed on him with a passion James had never seen before. There was no question whether Severus was telling the truth, when he nodded his head a tiny fraction. Who was he to deny James anything? If he wanted an answer that badly, then it only pained Severus to prolong his frustration.

"Say it," James whispered hoarsely. If he wasn't going to die, he damned well needed to hear it.

Severus swallowed, his gaze flickering towards James' friends and Lily in particular, before raising his voice a notch and saying clearly, "I love you."

James smiled slowly, lips tilting until he was beaming. Without hesitation, he nodded in willful acceptance in leaned in for a kiss that would bring the confirmation of disaster all bystanders were waiting for.

James lingered at a breaths distance away and Severus closed the gap.

Both jumped as a single clapping echoed round the hall, breaking them apart and disrupting the deathly hush that fallen around them.

Sirius stepped forward from within the crowds, his arm slipping from around Lily's shoulders to finger for his wand.

"Well done, James," he said loudly, stepping into the limelight. Crowds parted to let him through, until he was standing directly before the couple, a wicked smirk on his face. "Bet well done mate. I believe I owe you a drink."

James' eyes were wide, as they slowly rose from Severus' dark pupils to stare at his best friend. He opened his mouth wordlessly, but Sirius spoke before he could get any words out. "Just like we planned. Now, for the finale of our bet. I know you can't wait to humiliate him further... Oh, and

let's talk about Amy at the same time, shall we?"

When James found his voice, he kept his eyes on Sirius' face, warning with no tolerance. "God, Sirius. Don't do this..." he rasped, automatically holding Severus tighter, but he could already feel the Slytherin twisting away from him.

## Chapter 16

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Sirius announced loudly, pivoting on his heel and opening his arms wide to his peers. "If I could have your attention for just a moment. I assure you, it will be most worth your time."

Already gawking, the students did not need much encouragement to cease partying completely, in order to creep eagerly forwards and listen to Sirius.

"No," James hissed, stemming any further speech on Sirius' part and further entralling their audience. Ensuring he kept one hand wound tightly round Severus' wrist, the other reached out to clasp at Sirius' shoulder tightly, spinning him back round. "You don't understand what you're doing. We need to talk-"

Shrugging away, Sirius shook his head firmly, a flicker of frustration crossing his set features. "I don't think so, Prongs. Give it up. The game's over."

"What game? There is no game anymore, Padfoot. This is the real thing for me," James explained, his voice low and strained. "You have to understand, this is not the way things are meant to be-"

"You are deluded," Sirius stated simply, leaning in and dropping his voice. "This was our plan from the start, James. I'm not going to pass up this opportunity and you shouldn't either. You're not thinking straight, mate. Trust me. I'm doing this for you. You'll thank me tomorrow when you've cleared your head, I can promise you that. Peter set about thirty dung bombs off in the courtyard and I took it upon myself to charm half of the books from the library to take a little midnight stroll. No teachers left, James... just us and Snivelly and your crowd."

James opened his mouth furiously to protest, but a figure appeared at his elbow, pinching him hard in the ribs.

"What's the big idea then?" Lily questioned, without tolerance. "Is this some kind of joke? Another pathetic prank?"

"Joke indeed," Sirius smiled crookedly, patting James on the shoulder. Raising his voice to include the entire vicinity in the conversation, Sirius pushed Severus and James forward until they were facing the crowds head on. "Well a bet actually. One that held James' life in the balance. You see, a little while ago, the marauders were-"

"I swear to God, if you do this, we'll never speak again," James warned, eyes flashing. Thrusting his wand forward in an act of desperation, he pointed it directly at Sirius' face. "This is the end for you and me."

Something uncertain flickered in Sirius' eyes as he considered the threat, but his confidence was only fueled by adrenaline and jealousy.

Allowing his gaze to drift across to Severus, he frowned harshly. "No. It's the end for him. Just like we planned."

James barely had time to react before Sirius had captured his wand, drawn it in a tight circle while uttering a spell all too familiar. Severus' hand was ripped from between his fingers with a sharp tug, dragging the Slytherin into the air, feet first.

"You've had your fun, Snape. Now's the time for some harsh truths," Sirius called, twitching his

wand so that Severus twirled through the air. "All the time you've thought James so helplessly in love with you, he's been sleeping around behind your back."

Severus gave a startled yelp as he was thrown into the air, followed by a series of loud curses, arms and legs flailing madly. While he struggled violently, Sirius explained the bet to all those eager to listen. His smooth voice rang through the crowds, exaggerating and providing excess detail in order to heighten their amusement, and his own personal glory.

Where James expected white hot rage, he found his mind drawn blank. Sirius' wayward explanation, stretching from the casting of the Unbreakable Vow, to their plan of seduction and subsequent humiliation, washed over him like a poison.

It was true, every word he said. He'd been a part on concocting this poison.

Sirius had rendered him immobile, pinning his arms to his side with a reflex spell and temporarily removing the use of his voice box. James' heart thudded uncontrollably in his chest, but it was as though time had slowed down, along with the volume. His worst nightmare was playing out right before his eyes, and there wasn't a damned shred of resource he could summon to stop it.

Severus' trousers were drawn down his body and tossed aside before it could be prevented, his faded boxers providing endless entertainment. Lily was tugging at Sirius' arm furiously in an attempt to make him see reason, while gesturing enigmatically to Severus in the air.

Severus' hair, where he had spent so long gelling it back, hung limply around his face.

A shiny shoe, colliding hard with his cheek, brought James back into action. Echoes of laughter came rushing back into his ears as Severus' flailing foot was swinging wildly before him. In a sudden jerk, James threw off his invisible bonds and made a grab for it.

"I'll kill you for this, Potter," Severus hissed, his voice sounding far less menacing when close to breaking. "You.. I knew... Let me down..."

"It's not me!" James cried desperately. "I'm not doing this-"

Severus let out a cry of pain as a well aimed stinging hex was thrown his way.

Sirius twirled his wand and Severus turned the right way up, suspended in mid-air.

"Ask James about Amy..."

"Amy who?" Severus spat.

"The Amy he's been fucking behind your back," Sirius grinned callously. "Ask him? Do you deny it James?"

Severus' eyes whipped round to find James, helpless and confused.

"Severus I-"

"Do. You. Deny. It?" Sirius repeated. "Do you deny making the bet to humiliate him? Do you deny that this was just one big game?"

James' eyes were wide, his face deathly pale. His voice was stuck in his throat.

Severus mouth contorted as bitter realisation dawned, an indistinguishable sound ripping from his throat.

James could not look him in the face.

"Sirius, if you don't let him down, I'll hex you into next week," James warned, releasing Severus' foot to lunge forwards and grab Sirius' jacket in his fists. "Let. Him. Go."

Giving his friend an extreme look of disgust, Sirius' finally relented and, with a sharp flick of his wand, Severus landed hard on the floor, accompanied by a loud, sickening crack. The next moment, the Slytherin was screaming, holding into his wrist, where it had bent backwards and snapped.

James winced, choking back a sudden wave of nausea as he stared at the disfigured arm. Scooping up Severus' trousers, he draped them across his legs to provide him with adequate modesty. Lily was already bending down, hissing angrily under her breath and tending to the wound while Severus gasped in obvious agony.

James opened his mouth helplessly, but before he could act, a shadow fell over them, bringing with it a deathly hush to the proceedings.

"What on earth is going on here?" McGonagall asked sternly, clearly in shock.

"Sirius, my office. Now," the headmaster instructed, stepping up alongside her, his usual twinkle absent.

They both smelt like stale dung, and Peter was grinning maliciously behind them.

"But, Professor-"

"You are already facing immediate expulsion, Mr. Black, do not make things worse."

Shoulders slouched, Sirius cast one last glance at James, smiling slightly in an attempt to discern whether the enjoyment of the bets finale had been shared. James broke eye contact and knelt beside Severus, reminding himself to remain calm while effectively portraying his negative response.

"Everybody else back to their dormitories," Dumbledore instructed quietly, as Sirius slouched towards the exit, but Severus had struggled to his feet, brushing Lily rudely aside and their attention was immovable.

"Let them continue... their... party," he hissed, between sharp gasps of pain. "If they can bare to... without their... most celebrated... entertainment."

"Severus..." James placed a hand on his arm, but Severus threw him off so forcefully that he stumbled back. In the split second their eyes met, James felt something inside of him break. Severus was only a breath away from losing the loose grip he had automatically gained on his hard front, his defiance and his anger... The furious tears threatening to make an appearance were only too clear a display of his utter humiliation.

A moment later, Severus had scrunched up his face and looked away, as though burned by the empathy in James' eyes, now believed to be false. The emotional pain Severus was suffering was far worse than his physical injury.

Silence descended as Severus' next move was anticipated.

Snorting distastefully, he shot the occupants of the hall a scathing glance. "Congratulations." Severus gave a jerky bow, vaguely directed towards James. Anger coursed through his veins, turning his whole world red. He desired nothing more than to return the bone deep hurt James had

bestowed on him, but he'd no way to return the humiliation after suffering such degradation.

His hair had fallen almost completely from its leather band, held to his face by a damp sweat. Blindly, he groped for his trousers, shoving his legs through. "A bet well won, I believe, James Potter." He spat the name with such venom that it wasn't only James that flinched. "How very Slytherin."

James shook his head silently, his stomach sinking further and further until he was as useless at constructing a single coherent sentence as Severus was. "You have to believe... This wasn't... I would never..."

In one forceful step, Severus had moved forwards and spat in James' face, the moisture dripping down the side of his nose to pool at his mouth. All of the closeness, the intimacy they had shared, had been ripped apart and discarded in a mere moment, as though it had never been there in the first place.

A few people snickered as James grimaced and wiped at the mess with his sleeve, eyes never once leaving Severus' face. "Just look at me," he said quietly, with forced calm. "Look at me and I can explain."

Severus made a sound, almost like a whimper of disbelief, but mingled with a forced hope, as though he longed to follow James' plea and find some all-forgiving explanation for this ugly revelation. Except for him, there was none. It was black and white. He'd been foolish enough to trust in a Gryffindor. He'd allowed his guard to drop, and his hopeful, softer side to take full reign. Now he would pay the consequences.

In that moment, Severus swore never to allow such foolishness into his behaviour ever again. He'd set out to humiliate James Potter and he'd allowed himself to become distracted from that goal. His own game had been turned against him, his partner proving victorious. Once again, he had been out-smarted and ridiculed in the most demeaning manner possible.

He would block his heart, his mind and throw away the key. It was the only way to ensure survival.

The cost of loving just wasn't worth his current disappointment.

Without another word, Severus cast one last scathing glance at his peers and fled.

He barely acknowledged the bright lights passing him by; the only remaining evidence that a few short minutes ago, such laughter had rung through these halls. The flower he'd propped into his pocket with such dedicated concentration, was taken by the force of gravity and trampled beneath his feet.

James remained frozen, the subsequent silence pressing at his ears in a deafening wail. There had always been the chance that something go disastrously wrong with the night's proceedings, but never, with all his brash Gryffindor hope, had he predicted an outcome as dire as this.

He could barely watch Severus' hurried limp from the hall, without feeling like the greatest bastard that ever walked the Earth. He'd deserved this punishment. He deserved to feel this way, but Severus did not and that was his fault.

A hand to his shoulder jolted him back to awareness. Dumbledore was looking down at him with a grave, albeit tense expression. "Go," he said simply, a sense of urgency James could relate to only too well. "You must not let him get away. Heaven knows what'll happen..."

Stumbling, James gave a shaky nod and charged blindly from the hall, racing out of the double doors before he could lose himself to cowardice.

If he'd retained any sense, he would've accepted Severus long gone by now.

The courtyard was eerily empty, fairy lights glistening with an inappropriate happiness, and James felt his heart sink in despair. A sense of desperation like he'd never known before urged him on, through the shadows and away from the bright lights of Hogwarts' gardens. He could not let Severus get away. There had been a fear in Dumbledore's eyes, matched only by his own, that warned him against failure.

Severus was not known to be a rational person when angered. If something happened... James would never forgive himself.

To James' relief, a hunched, unmistakable black clad figure was barely visible near the lawn approaching the forbidden forest. Severus seemed to have a destination in mind, if his current forceful strides were anything to go by. There was a pattern to his movement that suggested a clear path, though James had no idea to where he'd go to seek solace.

"Severus, stop," James yelled, knowing it was useless.

His feet thudded across the dry earth as he hurtled towards Severus' lonely figure, adrenaline pounding his veins like he'd never known before.

James almost collided with Severus when he came to an abrupt halt, skidding to an unbalanced stop. The only source of light that remained their current distance from the castle was the moon, and it paid Severus' tear stained features no compliments.

"I shall not allow you to humiliate me further," Severus swore, pointing a shaking finger at James' chest. Taking deep gulps of air, he failed in keeping his voice steady. "Enough... Merlin, Potter, what more could you want?"

"I never planned to..." James begun, torn completely by the clear anguish on Severus' face. He could not lie. Their relationship had been broken by lies. Dumbledore was right. It would only cause it to rot from the inside. It would only die further if he continued to build on it with deceit. "Ok, I did plan to humiliate you, but that was months and months ago. Way before I knew you properly."

"You convinced me to declare... emotion for you, in front of the entire school," Severus spat, groping for his wand and cursing when he couldn't find it. "Of course you wished to mock-"

"No. I had to know how you felt. Like Sirius said, we made the unbreakable vow. If you don't... didn't love me, then I would be dead-"

"Then I take it all back," Severus hissed venomously. "I don't... I never did... It was all a lie-"

"It doesn't work like that," James explained, taking a tentative step closer and drawing courage when Severus did not move away. "You can't switch off your love for me, just like I can't stop loving you-"

Severus flinched. "Enough. Why do you continue to play games? It was a lie, Potter. All a lie. Stop messing-"

"I'm not. Please. Put me under veritaserum. Take all of my memories. Just listen. I changed my mind! You changed me. I fell in love. Ask Remus. Ask Dumbledore. I never went to the Ball

tonight with intention to hurt you..."

James broke off as a large dollop of water landed on his nose, followed by an immediate downpour, as though it had planned to descend upon him at that exact moment. Rain had finally broke through the summer heat wave, soaking them both to the core in seconds.

Nudging Severus roughly aside until they were both sheltered by the woods, James continued with determination. "Ever since you first took me into the dungeons, after that first date, I began to question myself, my motives, everything that made me a marauder. When I realised I had developed feelings for you, I was forced to re-assess my entire character. I had to fit you into my life somehow! I had to convince myself I was worthy-"

Severus snorted, brushing water from his face and turning away, but James stepped closer still, unrelenting.

"If you want to leave me, at least do it for the right reasons. Go because I'm an arse and I can't take proper care of you. I allowed you to get hurt. Because I lied and I... I manipulated you and it wasn't fair. Not because you thought I wanted to humiliate you... and make you seem some kind of joke. I have nothing but respect for you, Severus. I should have explained this days ago, I know. Call me a coward, but I didn't want to lose you-"

"Cut the dramatics, Potter," Severus sniffed dismissively, failing to appear unaffected by James' rushed, emotional explanation. "You act as though I have been the one to cause hurt."

"God, you have, Severus," James sighed, running his hands through his hair and sending flecks of rain in every direction. "If you can't see how much I..."

Severus turned away before James could finish, scowling against the harsh breeze against his face, whipping at his clothes. "Who is Amy?" he asked abruptly, hating the coil of jealousy that churned his insides.

James winced, watching Severus apprehensively through his fringe. He had no possible defense against this accusation. "A mistake," he said simply. "A stupid mistake that I will never repeat..." It sounded lame even to his own ears.

They stood in silence for seconds, which lengthened to minutes. James could not break his stare from Severus' deathly pale face, as though he were seeing him for the last time, while the Slytherin focused his gaze into the rain, far off into the distance with a deeply grim expression, face twitching in grief.

When he could bare the tension no longer, Severus forced aside an immeasurable amount of betrayal and turned to James, smoothing his features into as much indifference as possible in the circumstances. "I suppose, Potter, now that your... ulterior motives have become apparent, I should also let you in on a little secret."

He felt nothing but pain. Blind, emotional pain. His body was numb, his mind was numb... his deformed wrist barely hurt anymore...

James frowned, remaining very still as water trickled freely down the side of his face, dripping down the collar of his shirt.

"I also had a plan," Severus confessed, tightening his jaw and staring at James head on. "Did you never wonder why I was so susceptible to your advances? That you were so alluring that not even I, whose school life you had destroyed, would be able to turn you away? I goaded you on. I acted in a

way that you seemed to appreciate. I allowed you to.. touch me, when it made my skin crawl-"

"You're lying."

"Am I?" Severus rose an eyebrow, a darkness setting into his features that James had not seen before. He shivered. "You merely caught onto the final act of humiliation before I was able. You won the game, not my heart. That is all-"

"Don't," James stopped him, an ugly look befalling him. "Don't degrade what we had. You wanted it just as much as I did-"

"Yet our relationship was riddled with lies," Severus argued, eyes flashing. "I suggest we part ways before your fan club arrives-"

"Stop it. Even if you did... also wish to harm me, initially, you can't just cast this aside-"

"You are filth," Severus cursed, interrupting James with a sharp wave of his hand. "I knew that and I allowed myself to ..." He shook his head with a bitter laugh. "I was foolish enough to ignore the rational side of my brain. I was well aware that your feelings towards me could not have been genuine."

James closed his eyes, aware that Severus was attempting to reduce his own humiliation. As much as he wanted to let him, he couldn't allow Severus to deny the truth when it would only further tear them apart.

"You're wrong," he repeated quietly. "And you're making a mistake-"

"You were my only mistake, Potter," Severus shouted. "You- You and your pathetic friends. Ever since I set foot in this school you have torn me apart, accursed me, ruined me."

Without warning, Severus flung himself at James before the other boy could account for his abrupt movement. Pinned against a tree, a flash of fear crossed James' face before he settled under Severus' weight. He hated himself for reveling in their close contact, even if it was in the most viscous form.

Severus beat against his chest, allowing himself to drown in the bitter disappointment that the truth had brought, his broken wrist having little effect against the unharmed Gryffindor.

James leant his head back against the bark and closed his eyes. "I love you," he said quietly, doing nothing to stop the attack.

"Shut up," Severus sneered at him, something in his voice breaking. He could not understand why James felt the need to torment him further with these games. Mind a whir of anger and confusion, he wrenched himself away from James and continued his previous path away from the woods.

"Where are you going?" James called after him. "Severus! Come back. You don't know where you're going."

Severus' snort was muffled by the rain. James took one look at the dark, rain beaten sky and darted after him, his hair almost immediately becoming plastered to his face.

When James slippery progress behind him showed no signs of slowing, Severus stopped, a slow realisation dawning. His anger cleared for a moment, as he made a silent plan for the next, most obvious chapter of his life. "No," he whispered quietly. Turning back, he realised with a sickening jolt what would happen if the Dark Lord were to witness his company.

"You must stay," he called over his shoulder, quite unprepared for the enormous, unwelcome wave of affection that consumed him as he took in James' helpless, sodden form, slipping towards him. He loathed to admit it, but James was right. He couldn't turn off his love that quickly. If James followed him, he would be killed.

Growling, he stumbled back towards his previous lover and wrestled him to the ground.

"Get off," James protested, before suddenly going limp beneath the weight of Severus' body once again, unwilling to hurt him. "Unless..."

"I am not attempting to seduce you," Severus snapped, pinning James beneath him a little more roughly. "See reason. You must return to the castle."

"Where ever you're going, I'm coming," James vowed, wriggling unsuccessfully. "It's the middle of the night, for god's sake. It's not safe."

"You wouldn't be so keen if you knew where I was headed," Severus argued, aiming a well placed punch to James stomach, more out of frustration than anger.

Winded, James peered at Severus through half lidded eyes with a hurt expression. "Ouch," he said quietly, rubbing at his assaulted middle. He knew if Severus really wanted to hurt him he'd use his wand. Not muggle methods. It only made James fight more. The Slytherin's heart was broken, he was betrayed beyond belief but he wouldn't hurt him..

Severus ignored his irrational guilt and fought to make James understand. "Go back, you fool. Serve your detentions and bask in your victory."

"Not until you tell me where you think you're going at this time of night," James argued, bracing himself against another blow but Severus merely hissed in agitation.

"I do not keep simular company as you, Potter. If you wish to die, accompany me by all means."

"What?" James responded blankly, failing to understand. "What are you talking about?"

Roughly pushing James into the dirt, Severus stood up to his full height. A moment of doubt caused his brow to furrow, his expression softening unconsciously as he eyed James muddy form, splayed out on the ground beneath him.

He scowled against it, hand clenching at his sides. Tears of frustration and lost hope fought to wreck themselves from his chest.

"You know, if things had not... had you remained loyal, I imagine I would not be on this path," he said, barely heard over the rain pelting them. "Take that knowledge with you, Potter."

"You're going to have to help me out here," James said, struggling to sit up. "Is there somewhere you've planned to be?"

"Come on, Potter," Severus hissed, perversely enjoying his position of power, knowing something that James did not and using it to hurt him. "Is my destination so unobvious? To whom would I swear allegiance? Who have you and your little friends always associated me with?"

"Not funny," James said seriously, visibly tensing as he could recall only one name, feared by all.

Severus gave a twisted sort of smile, taking great satisfaction in James' unease. "I am not joking."

"If you're doing this just to get back at me-"

"What do you care, Potter?" Severus spat, heaving his boot onto James' leg as the boy intended to stand.

"Because I'd die before I let you serve him," James returned just as furiously, an overwhelming surge of protectiveness and bone deep panic overcoming him. "Don't be a fucking fool! If you go to him, he'll be the death of you."

"Then know this," Severus said quietly, closing his eyes briefly before stepping forward into the light. "After you declared... falsely made me believe that you cared for me... all notion to join the Dark Lord were absent. I would not have gone. Now... thanks to you, I shall serve him loyally, without guilt. Have that on your conscience."

Throwing off Severus' foot, James pushed himself to his feet. "Why on earth would he agree to meet you, tonight of all nights?"

"A little gathering arranged by Lucius Malfoy-"

"I'll kill him," James promised, striding off in the direction Severus had been taking. "Where are you meeting him?"

Severus snorted, watching James futile progress with mild amusement and a hint of sadness. "You can give up the act, Potter. I know that you do not care for me."

James rolled his eyes, growling in frustration. "Then why an earth am I here, getting ridiculously wet and shouting myself hoarse? Where is my audience now, hmm?"

Severus felt a moment of unease as he assessed the point. "So, you'd protect me from... dark forces, yet you'd have me hung by the ankles?"

"I only want to protect you." James shook himself restlessly, his mind a whir of confused emotions. Anger, betrayal, regret, hope, desperation...

"Well you've done a poor job so far," Severus sniffed. "No wonder each one of your relationships ends within such a short period."

"Yes, I know," James admitted, recovering his previous distance until they were face to face. "But I think you're missing the point, Severus. You are the only one that matters. No body else matters! Do you have any idea what I did for you tonight? Any idea what I was prepared to give up to be with you? Come back with me. To the castle. Let us start over. There's no need to... go to extremes. He can't offer you what I can-"

"He can offer me security in return for my loyalty," Severus returned swiftly, eyeing James with disdain. "Something you never have. There can be no love where there is no trust. No matter what foolish affections you may have convinced yourself of, in time, you would grow bored, embarrassed, resentful... wearisome of my presence."

"No."

"Yes. You are a Gryffindor, Potter. You were born brainless."

"We're as bad as each other! Neither one of us knew what we were getting into when we started this mess. But we're here now and you need to make a decision. Me or him?"

Severus' lip tightened, his temple pulsing. He so wanted to believe James to be sincere, but he'd been knocked too badly to trust again so carelessly. He'd put his faith in the Gryffindor and had it ripped apart. He would not be a fool and tempt the same fate twice.

"Please," James continued helplessly as Severus remained unresponsive. "We can put the past behind us and start fresh. We'll go by your rules. I'll prove that I love you, every damn day for the rest of my life. Remember how it was. Remember that shower, Severus... Remember how warm it was.. How it felt to be close to me... How I made you feel..." James knew that if he'd sunk to such a level, using physical pleasure as bait, he'd already lost the fight, confirmed by Severus heavy swallow and bitter shake of the head, as he fought off memories.

"An illusion of lust," he muttered. "It is not enough that you abused my emotions... that you had to feign pleasure in my body also?"

"For God's sake, Severus, think! Did I ever do anything but bring you pleasure? I never forced you to... touch me. We never had sex! I could have pushed, but I didn't. In that shower, all I did was give. It was all for you. I was trying to show you-"

"Buttering me up for future occasions where you'd have me spread wide for your entertainment, and that of others?" Severus sneered unpleasantly. "Where was the camera hidden?"

"Don't befoul what we had, Severus," James said in a low voice, shaking his head. "It was real. Maybe not at first but-"

"You would do anything for me?" Severus asked loudly, cutting him off. "You, James Potter, after that display, wish me to believe that?"

"Anything," James nodded firmly.

"Would you leave me be?"

James' face, if possible, fell further. "But that's not what you want. Not really."

"Would you not allow me to make my own choice? Decide my own destiny?" Severus stepped forwards, far too sorely tempted by the path of destruction he so wanted to propel himself upon, to consider accepting any form of apology. After all, James had proved he was worth nothing more. "You tempted me towards the light, James, but I choose darkness."

Before James could utter a sound, Severus had pulled the wand from inside his pocket, pointed it at his face, sending his world into darkness.

Severus turned sharply to walk away, his chest constricting in pain he could not have imagined. Any tug towards forgiveness was swiftly cut short each time Amy's face sprang into his mind, tormenting him... The jeers from the crowds... The pain in his wrist...

Severus had not walked two steps before he was compelled to turn back, his entire body rigid. Clenching his jaw, he gave into his own unavoidable demand that he levitate James' unconscious form to the edge of the trees, into relative safety.

His cursed his own weakness as he removed his own jacket, baring himself to the cold while draping it over James to keep him at least partially warm.

Swallowing deeply, he lingered a moment longer than necessary to brush aside James' fringe. Leaning forwards, he kept his eyes focused on James' relaxed features, frozen in a grim expression.

"I hate you," he whispered against James' skin, closing his eyes and inhaling the boy's scent for the last time.

A moment later, he had drawn up all of the hatred required to walk away, towards a life that held a promise of power and opportunity that Severus could not ignore in such a hopeless state. He would think of James Potter after today, only as a reminder of the weaknesses of love and its overwhelming potential to hurt.

He was catapulted towards darkest possible fate, after glimpsing a more honest existence only briefly. Deep down, he'd always known he was not deserving of the love of another. For now, he would place his life in Voldemort's hands, having lost the will to aside himself with the force of goodness, when it had done nothing but stab him in the back.

Severus rounded a corner, head bowed and forehead screwed up. Before he was quite prepared, a huddle of hooded wizards, circled around a single, solitary figure, were but yards away. Drawing in a deep breath, he roughly wiped away the last of the tears that lingered on his lashes, and strode towards them.

## Chapter 17

- Three Years Later -

Miles beneath the streets of London, buried deep within the walls of the ministry, a solitary candle rested on the center of a desk in the only room left occupied. Casting a dim glow among countless articles, the light stretched up across the front of smart robes to broad shoulders.

The figure of a man was a flickering pattern on the wall, his hollow face strained as the final lingering suggestions of youth were masked by premature lines. His left hand splayed among a littering of newspaper cuttings, sorting and obsessing restlessly, while his right moved absently through his hair.

"You want me to leave the keys again, Mr. Potter?"

James raised his head abruptly, his distant expression flickering into one of slow recognition. He closed his eyes in a prolonged blink before glancing at his watch, and gave a short nod to the man lingering uncertainly in the doorway.

The caretaker turned to leave, but after a moments hesitation, took a step closer to the table, frowning gently. "Forgive my forwardness, Mr. Potter... but is there not somewhere else you'd rather be?"

When James merely raised an eyebrow, he continued tentatively, eyeing the younger man only with concern. "There's nothing more you can do about them." He jabbed a finger at the bleak images of wanted death eaters on the wall, glaring viciously at their surroundings. "At least not tonight. It's late. Why not go home?"

"These are dark times," he ploughed on hesitantly. "Very dark. A young lad like you... I hear that your wife has recently given birth-"

"Yes, she has," James cut across him, sitting back and giving the man an empty sort of stare. His voice was rather hoarse, as though he hadn't used it in a while.

"You must be proud-"

"Of course." James dropped his gaze to the table. "Now, just leave the keys. Thank you."

Shaking his head in reluctant acceptance, the caretaker tightened his lips and dropped the metal onto the table with a soft clang. "As you wish."

James immediately bowed his head once more to his work, as though there had been no interruption, but a wrinkly hand moved to obstruct his view, crinkling the parchment and obscuring the lettering. He was determined to get his point across, whether James wished to hear it or not.

"Just so you know..." he continued stubbornly, unperturbed as James emitted a small sigh and relented to humouring the old man, "your efforts have not gone unnoticed, even if I would wish you... elsewhere, with all the best regards. My wife only sleeps at night because I tell her the influence of you people. You may not think I notice, just sweeping the floors and all, but whatever allegiance you fellows of the light have sworn to Albus Dumbledore, I know it's doing us no harm. I had no hope before I saw, with my own eyes, the work you men have put in when you drop by."

You'll be rewarded when the time comes."

This time he did not look back as he wandered through the door, mop in hand. Trailing his wand along the window sill to collect all of the dust, he disappeared into the opposite office, whistling a tune as old as himself.

With the Order of the Phoenix spending increasing lengths of time within the Ministry these days, James, who frequently stayed late, had almost become a creature of fascination. The man was the closest friend to Albus Dumbledore. He had been ever since his final years at school, where word said he'd been deeply involved in some of the very earliest movements against Voldemort.

He'd joined the Order almost immediately after graduation, working tirelessly. Heaven knows how he'd found the time to procure himself a beautiful wife and newborn son. With Remus Lupin as best man, James Potter had wed fairly young for a wizard. Ned remembered reading about it in the paper. It gave him hope that, perhaps, there was more beneath the surface than was suggested by the grim, almost mechanical functioning of James' exterior.

The man appeared haunted, restless and unfavourably bitter, yet aside from the obvious, there appeared no distinct reason why he should be so.

No, there was no light heartedness about the man. No playfulness. No wish to forget and simply enjoy each moment, as though it may be his last, as so many other fighters of the light seemed to resort to these days. He was without hope, yet the fiercest fighter of them all. A creature of fascination indeed, yet one pitied quite shamelessly.

James closed his eyes wearily as he obstructed the caretakers saddened, curious face from his sight, his quill gradually slowing its rapid movement across parchment. With a deeply grim expression, he allowed his head to roll onto the back of his chair, lips drawn into a tight line.

Why did he not go home?

He'd given up asking himself that question months ago, though the concept still caused him headache. Remus reminded him often enough that dwelling in the past was unhealthy. Not that James made any conscious effort to dissect his past failings any longer. They merely came to him unasked, hollowing out his insides and rendering him incapable of even creating the illusion that he was at least content.

Guilt. It was like a parasite and he was sick of it.

If he dared glance inward, and justify to himself just what he'd allowed himself to become, he shuddered to imagine the picture he would find... Albus warned him time and again... left subtle hints alongside blatant carbon copies of his condition, but James lacked the courage to assess his own damage. Defiance was suiting him just fine, as was an unnecessary loneliness and sense of constant suffocation.

Who was he to analyse why placing his palm on Lily's swollen stomach and forcing a smile, could give him the overwhelming urge to vomit? Why could he not beam like a fool and feel the helpless joy so many others did when blessed with all a man should have the right to want? Who was he to analyse the sheer unforgivable disappointment he felt whenever he looked into Harry's eyes and registered their bright green... when so he wished they were black?

James snapped his head forwards, detesting himself for even entertaining such a fantasy, for tarnishing his new son that way when he was the best thing to happen to him... in a long while.

A dull ache at his temples, James rose to his feet, his face shuttered.

... Every step he took pivoted around one single moment three years ago. He could not stand how it had ruled him, ruined him... cruelly preventing him from leading a normal life when all he wished to do was forget.

Each day a new set of deaths appeared in the paper. James knew to whom the ugly deed belonged... And who had given the merciless man the freedom to kill so many without emotion or restraint.

James shuddered, pressing his knuckles into his eyes.

He'd no right to be wallowing in self pity, or to ask for more than had been bestowed on him, when many other Order members had lost far more than he. Wives. Husbands. Children even. And yet he found a solace in these articles, in the grim stories and the challenge they presented.

For the link they provided to a certain Slytherin who refused to dislodge from the permanent residence he had taken in James' thoughts.

His feelings were unforgivable, and James hated himself for it. Hated himself for his weakness... for his inability to rid himself of his hidden desires, which still lingered behind the fragile wall of hate he had created in order to distance himself from the man who'd grown to reside in Voldemort's very inner circle

James knew, if given the chance, he'd kill such a man where he stood. Severus Snape would pay for his crimes, and James would be the one to sentence him. He would not hesitate, nor blink... yet still he found himself envying those so intimately abused by the man who haunted his every waking hour, for at least they had been granted with the chance to be near him, perhaps to breathe in his scent as they were cast down into oblivion... They would see his eyes and witness a glance at least, however brief, into his pitiless soul. Something James felt sorely deprived of.

He could feel the eyes of every one of the black hooded figures, stuck as moving images on the walls around him. Using contacts at the ministry, as well as their resources, was hardly aiding him in his quest against them, as Dumbledore had hoped. He would not rest until every last one of them was captured. Not until he had reached redemption.

One set of coal black eyes, clearly distinguished from those around him, was like fire on the back of his neck. James had long since trained himself not to look at this particular picture. One glance and he would be lost... a broken man once more. Pathetic. Angry. Useless.

His feelings towards Severus had not faded over the years, but grown bitter, manipulating something inside of him that squeezed so tightly, he considered himself a coward and did his best to imagine it did not exist. He knew that man no longer, after all.

...

James awoke next morning, and it was just like any other morning. Lily's arm was draped over his waist, auburn hair falling across his shoulder and chest, warm breath on his neck where she curled up behind him.

Here he felt safe. In the early hours of the morning, he could convince himself of this perfection. The outside world had no place in their bedroom. Here he could pretend there had been no interruption in the long journey towards this... domesticity, ignoring the ugly reality of the unseen complications in this dream they'd once shared.

James twisted slightly, wondering exactly when he'd begun to consider his wife's hold on his waist just a little too tight. Suffocating even. Not long ago, he'd relished the closeness they shared... the way her body had the ability to ease his mind of all other complications, and allow him to simply bask in the primal pleasure of which he'd never lost affection.

Allowing his eyes to drift close once again, for the merest moment, James fought off the last demons of his subconscious mind. No matter how hard he denied certain bitter memories by day, he'd not yet mastered the practice of barring them from his head by night. He knew he must often speak in his sleep... mutter things... many of which unforgivable... yet Lily never spoke of it.

Autumn leaves spilled in through the partially opened window, enhancing the warm glow that basked in the calm of the early morning. Their bedroom was small, but all they needed. Sighing softly, James lifted his head only to register the time, but it was enough to rouse his wife.

"Morning," Lily whispered sleepily, retracting her arms to stretch out. "I waited up, but I must have drifted off. I didn't hear you get in."

"Morning," he returned quietly, ignoring the observation. James slowly rolled himself onto his back, giving her a lazy smile and obediently placing a kiss on her forehead when she snuggled against him. "You know I have to leave in-"

"Yes," she replied, perhaps too quickly. "I know... I'm going to have words with Albus. He keeps you away from me far too often."

Slipping down across his upper torso, Lily gave her husband a sultry smile, lifting his t-shirt to run her palms across his smooth chest. "I'm sure he won't mind if you're just a little late. You're working yourself into the ground, James."

James groaned inwardly as she begun placing delicate kisses down his stomach, fiddling pointedly with the hem of his boxers. Where once these gentle caresses would've ignited fire in his body, he could not help but wish her touch harder, more demanding... He'd no need of these feather light kisses, as though he would break.

For once, he wanted to be treated as he felt. Like someone who deserved punishment, rather than pleasure. He was unworthy of such loving attentions.

He lifted his hands to her sides, gently rubbing as she sucked lightly on the side of his neck. He could sense her excitement growing and sighed inwardly, trying to ignite a similar enthusiasm inside himself, but he remained numb to the advances.

He could not help but wish the lines of her body harder... like the man he'd been with just the other week. A man James could not possibly recall by name. Nor even face. But he'd had dark hair, with eyes just as pitiless, and that was all James had considered important before he bedded him. Same as the time before. And the time before that. God help him, he could not even remain faithful.

Sex with Lily was never unsatisfying, but more often than not it wasn't what James needed, or wanted.

He felt spoiled. Like a part inside of him, the most important part, that made him who he was, gave him the ability to love with all that he had, had been broken. He could not love Lily like she wanted because he'd no idea how to.

Lily was careful never to say... his name, but sometimes James thought that she suspected. That she knew very well of his insecurities, of his shame... of his unfaithfulness.. He was more having an

affair with the man in his head, with his memories, than he was with any of the empty minded people he sought actual release in.

Lately, he'd only felt a cheat as he enjoyed her hands on his body, accepting pleasure while he was barely able to hold onto the fact, and know, like he should, that it was her supplying it.

"I think I can hear the baby crying," James broke into her languid exploration, a coil of anxiety pinching at his gut as he realised, no matter her efforts, he would not be able to perform this morning. Not in the manner she both expected and deserved. "Perhaps I should just check..."

Lily raised her head wearily, as though she'd been waiting for such a response. "James," she said quietly, almost pleading. "We haven't... It's been a while since... Not since Harry was conceived...I need..."

James cringed beneath the bed sheets, arms dropping heavily back to his sides. Casting his wife a fleeting smile, he pried her away from his chest and slipped his bare feet out onto the carpet. "I'll just see if it needs feeding."

"It? When will you start calling Harry by name?" Lily asked, shaking her head as she watched James pull some socks on. There was an undercurrent of frustration in her voice for the first time. "He's yours, James. Yours and mine. Not 'the baby.'"

James could feel Lily's eyes following him through the door, but he daren't turn around for fear that she'd see his torment.. His eyes would give him away, he knew, and after everything, he would not stand losing Lily above it all. He'd betrayed her enough already. Didn't she understand? He was broken.

...

With the number of questions fired towards him and the general havoc that currently made up the ministry, James found himself in his office much later than usual. Rubbing at the creases on his forehead, he shrugged out of his outer cloak and slipped bonelessly into a chair.

No sooner had he done so than he felt himself violently tipped backwards, his feet following his head onto the floor. Before he'd even had time to cast a light, in order to assess the situation, his wand was scorched from his fingers.

Gasping in pain, James palm flattened and his wand rolled away.

"No wonder the Order of The Phoenix is proving such little competition for the Dark Lord," came a deep voice from across the room, growing steadily nearer. "Your reflexes are appalling."

James' eyes widened, his heart thumping heavily in his chest. With a forwards lurch, he pushed himself awkwardly onto his feet. Before he'd managed to straighten up, a large boot collided hard with his stomach.

Once more on his back, James took a little longer to recover.

Wheezing, he found himself staring at the cracks in the ceiling and debating the current worthiness of his existence. What would it matter if this was the end anyway? He'd been working himself into a hole. One that he could never get out of. The victory he so craved was unattainable. Either way this war ended, he was going to lose.

"What do you want?" he asked breathlessly, no doubt in his mind that his captor was a death eater, though he'd yet to see his face. The question was, how long until he begun to torture him for

information and exactly how do he gain access into the ministry?

The man snarled, a far too predatory sound that made James visibly flinch. He attempted to crane his neck upwards but a foot compressed him to the ground, holding him to the floor.

Blinking, his gaze gradually focused on the masked face above him. His heart seemed to have weaved a path into his throat, where the power of its beat had become a physical pain.

Feeling rather reckless, James snorted. "Lose the mask."

"I hardly feel that you are in the position to make such demands," came the sly response.

James gave a short, humourless laugh, and then froze. Something about the man's dry tones caused his insides to jolt, his body stiffening as his mind caught up with his ears.

He shifted himself upwards as far as he was able, until he was half leaning on his elbows. "Take off the mask," he repeated, a little more urgently. He was aware of how ridiculous he must sound, but it hardly seemed to matter.

"Coward," he added, when the man was slow to comply and finally received the respond he wanted.

He saw the mouth work, and then seal in a thin line. In a slow, almost hesitant movement, the cover was taken from the man's face and dropped lightly onto the table.

James felt as though somebody had physically punched him as, inch by inch, pale sallow skin was revealed to him.

Lips sneered and familiar crooked teeth bared down at him, yellower than he remembered. The hooked nose he'd often imagined, appeared to have been broken, more than a few more times. Empty eyes stared down at him, so void of emotion that James believed the ground he lay on would simply open and swallow him up from the lack of empathy there.

He blinked, willing the ice cold numbness inside of him to transform into rage so he could at least act. His head swam and his body was so tense it hurt.

It couldn't be...

"What's the matter, Potter?" the man sneered, wand stretched lazily out in front of him, far too close to his face. "No welcome greeting? I assumed, after our... emotional departure, you'd be far more glad to see me."

"Severus," James whispered hoarsely, barely processing any actual words the man was saying, but stared, transfixed, as the mouth moved. As it breathed life.

Severus stood in front of him as a living being, solid and mortal, rather than some sordid replica he dredged up in the middle of the night, and James knew all at once, that he was not at all ready for this encounter.

Something in the man's eyes flickered with the unreserved desperation in James' voice, but the boot only pressed down more painfully. His lips drew into a corner, as an eyebrow was raised.

"I come to deliver a message," he stated blandly, averting his eyes to the covered walls around him, as though James' face did not hold enough interest to retain his attention. "Do not struggle-"

Without warning, James pushed himself to his feet, eyes narrowing. A sudden burst of energy found him standing, out of breath, moments before he realised he'd once again left himself foolishly vulnerable.

He'd barely re-focused on the black clad figure before a boot collided with his chest and he heaved. James swore heavily, doubling over.

"Language, Potter," was the smooth reprimand, lined with a hint of amusement.

James closed his eyes as the achingly familiar tone washed over him, incapacitating him far worse than any physical blow. He was very aware of the position of his wand, resting against the table leg. He'd been mentally preparing himself for this day... bracing against the inevitable, yet he found himself deeply relieved that his only means of seriously hurting the man lay so far out of reach.

Severus took a step closer and James flinched involuntarily.

"What is the matter?" Severus snapped, more out of curiosity than concern. "Are you ill?"

James knew he was not referring to his current wounded condition but his general lack of defense, and obvious weariness. He found his chin taken in firm fingers and fought not to close his eyes against the touch. He wouldn't enjoy it. He wouldn't...

Gradually, he straightened, still clutching at his stomach, but the fingers stayed in place, eyes all over his face, scrutinizing.

Filled with shame, James allowed his eyes to rake over Severus' face hungrily, following suit. Almost as though in fear of what he would see, he allowed his eyes to trail in slowly up the lean figure before him, drinking in the sight, until he was staring, once more, into a pair of cold black eyes.

He wondered if it was his imagination but Severus seemed thinner, less whole. His hair had always been lank, but now it was also dirty and matted. However, he had never seen the man more composed. This was not the awkward teenager he'd known, this was a full grown man, and a dangerous one at that.

"You're even uglier than I remember," James stated bluntly, feeling rather dizzy.

That earned him a stinging hex, one of which he liked to hope was not as severe as it could have been.

Abruptly, Severus dropped his face with a sharp twist, all signs of curiosity absent. "And it seems your genes were not so rewarding after all," he responded, just as cruelly. "You are less... fine than I remember. Bagged eyes? Hair that is less than immaculate? Stubble? It appears you have let yourself go." A wand stabbed at his hips. "And your waistline is positively protruding, Potter."

James scowled, unwilling to acknowledge that any hinder on his physical appearance hurt more than it should. Severus' gaze was flickering over him uncomplimentary. He was well aware that he'd put on weight. Not enough to deserve such comments, but he was not the toned, well groomed young man he had once been. It had never mattered much to him until now, and again, he hated himself for it.

"A message, you say?" James asked, diverting the conversation back to necessities, as he roughly wiped his bloody chin on the back of his hand. "You were sent here by Voldemort-"

"Do not speak his name," Severus hissed, eyes flashing. "You have no idea-"

"Oh shut up," James snapped, flopping back into his chair and heaving a sigh. Pulling up his sleeve, he ignored the threat of Severus' wand and dabbed at his wounds. He was very aware of people walking up and down the corridor outside, but it seems Severus must've secured their privacy, for he hardly seemed concerned.

"If you've come to kill me, get on with it. Otherwise, leave before I return the favour."

Severus merely looked at him for a moment, face inscrutable, and James wondered if he really had expected a warmer welcome. Well, if he had, he'd be disappointed, James thought. After all that had happened, and so publicly, it seemed unlikely he'd expect anything less.

"If my intentions were such, Potter, you would be dead already," Severus observed coldly. "I am merely here to offer a warning. As I am sure Albus Dumbledore has made you aware of certain movements of the Dark Lord, that directly threaten your... family."

"Of course," James answered tersely, suspicion at its highest. "My son..."

"Indeed," Severus agreed, and for a split moment James thought he saw the other man flinch, but it may have been his imagination. "The Dark Lord will come for him. If you stand in his way, you shall also suffer a similar fate."

"Careful, Snape, it almost sounds as though you care," James muttered darkly.

Severus' lip curled. He shot James a filthy glance. "Hardly. I-"

"Then why are you really here?"

Severus' closed his eyes briefly, in obvious impatience. "Have you grown deaf as well as fat? I am the only one capable of offering you assistance-"

"And why on earth would you do that?" James asked incredulously, searching for his wand with his foot. "Don't play games, Snape. You want me dead just like every other Death Eater. If you want Voldemort to succeed, I'll only stand in your way. There is no possible reason you could want me alive."

With a quick glance at his wand, James ran his tongue along his teeth and scowled.

"It is all about you, isn't it, Potter?" Snape snarled, eyeing the other man with disdain. "Whatever made you believe I was here for your sake?"

James opened his mouth to project a predictable stream of ill comprehension, but Severus rolled his eyes. "With whom do you reside?"

Recognition flashed across James' features and he tensed. "Lily," he breathed.

"Exactly. I wish no harm to come to her, regardless of my... allegiances. Encase you have forgotten, she and I were once close-"

"So were we," James interjected, before he could stop himself. He instantly flushed and glanced away, unwilling to register anything beyond the mild shock in the Slytherin's eyes. But when only silence came, and no instant disgust or denial of any such feeling, he found his gaze drawn towards the other man.

"So we were..." Severus agreed finally, to James' surprise, his voice deep and slow. James loathed to admit that the depths to his voice had grown into something surprisingly sensual over the years, much like he imagined it would.

Severus stared at him and it was all James could do not to look away. A heat had risen in those dark eyes that caused a shudder to run through James' entire body. Even if he had wished to bully Severus now, to intimidate him, like he had when they were at school, any attempt would be useless. There was no questioning of who held the power now.

Being a death eater had obviously given Severus the confidence he had so lacked in previous years, proved by the assertion and fearlessness he was currently demonstrating.

Severus' apparent indifference of their history hurt more than any possible illusion of defiance, and James suspected the man knew that, hence his current display.

They looked at each other for a long moment before Severus took a step backwards. In one clean sweep, he had picked up James' wand and casually thrown it to him. "Consider yourself warned," he said. "Hiding from the Dark Lord will not suffice. I suggest you discover alternate means of protection."

With that, Severus cast him one last withering glance and turned to leave.

"Wait," James called, unable to fathom a reasonable reason of why he did, except he didn't want the man out of his presence so quickly, and after such a cold display. "That's it? You think I'm just going to let you walk out, after all you've done? Do you know how many muggles you've killed, Snape? Do you have any idea?"

He stood up abruptly, ignoring the sharp stabs of pain in his stomach that warned him it was bruised. He thrust forward the wand he'd been handed back, and opened his mouth for the incantation to kill.

Severus sneered. "I hardly doubt you have the power to seriously harm me, Potter, even if you wanted to."

"I'm not weak," James hissed. "I just want to... savour this moment. I'm going to make you beg."

"Really?" Snape raised an eyebrow, his gaze flickering from James' wand to his face. "Is that why you haven't yet turned me in? This place could be swarming with aurors within the second, awaiting to brand me with the dementor's kiss. You must have a hidden means of contact. Yet... we find ourselves very much alone. Hardly threatening, is it?"

James tensed, but remained silent.

Severus took a step forward. "I admit, I had expected slightly more... activity in your office, Potter. Admirers, well-wishers... perhaps a mascot. Turned them all against you? I do not blame them. You look no more fitting than a corpse."

Severus stepped forwards again, no wand needed. "Weak," he whispered harshly.

James' resolve broke and he leaned in, closing the little gap between them and kissing Severus roughly on the side of the mouth, lingering a moment to fist his hands in the man's robes, breathing deeply and feeling his head swim. The proximity was too much and not enough at once. "I will kill you," he promised quietly, eyes hard. "Just give me time." Pushing the man back with disgust, James hissed, "Get out," and put a good two feet between them.

Severus' eyes widened, "Now you have me intrigued," he admitted quietly, placing a finger to his lip.

James rolled his eyes, flustered and angry with himself. He should have known he'd never gather the nerve needed to kill this man on immediate sight. He would - He could... Just not today.

"Look, I suggest you leave before I change my mind. Stop playing your stupid games, and acting like you don't know what your presence is doing, and just... leave."

"You want me to?" Severus asked, staring at James with a look he could not quite understand.

"Yes," he insisted, but Severus shook his head.

"You are lying," he said. "Occlumency, Potter, is a useful skill. I have not picked up many of such from the Dark Lord, but this, I find most... illuminating."

Before James could even fathom moving away, Severus had regained the distance James had opened and tilted the other man's face up. Instantly, James felt his mind invaded with the most peculiar sensation, images flashing across the inside of his eye lids of their own accord and he could do nothing to stop them.

He winced and watched, helplessly, as he saw himself moaning Severus' name as he came in the shower as part of his morning ritual... Turning away from Lily after sex to stare at the wall with an empty expression... Holding Harry to his chest and meeting his eyes helplessly, as though lost... Memories of their time at school together, replayed, again and again... Standing at the altar and 'kissing the bride.' Pulling back the veil to hold the wrong face... taste the wrong lips...

It could have been hours, or mere moments later that Severus dropped his face with a snarl, expression torn between disgust and genuine surprise.

"You, Potter," he said, slightly hoarse, his eyes darkened considerably. "Have everything you could ever want. And still... You dream of that..."

James sighed shakily, closing his eyes in defeat. Severus was right. He was weak. "What do you want?" he repeated. "If you're here to antagonize me-"

"Antagonize?" Severus repeated sharply. "Could I? Are your... lingering affections so that I would be granted the power to do so?"

James glanced up, and for the first time, entertained the idea that Severus had not forgotten him. Not forgotten them. Something in the Slytherin's eyes flickered with a sudden, unmistakable heat, and reckless hope bloomed in James' chest. Hope he immediately fought. He would not go back there. What they had was over. The man had blood on his hands. He had betrayed him. He didn't even have a heart. James couldn't allow himself to be dragged into this trick. Snape had chosen his side.

"Leave," he repeated, hating how utterly desperate he sounded. He had no idea what game Severus was playing, but it was undoubtedly dangerous.

"And If I chose to stay?" Severus asked quietly.

The question held more weight than James could account for, but he shook his head regardless. "You ran out on me before," he replied coldly, turning his back and clutching the table in front of him with whitened knuckles. "You shouldn't find it too hard."

"I did," Severus agreed from behind him. "And I would not hesitate to do so again. However... I am not prepared to leave until you... heed my warning."

"Do you know when Voldemort will attack? A date? A time perhaps?" James snapped, spinning around, only to find that Severus was far too close. He stumbled ungraciously backwards to a dark chuckle.

"No? Then you must have a spell that will help to repel him?" James continued regardless. God, when did Severus grow so tall? Why was he not cowering, or stuttering, or looking to him for guidance? Why was he so self-assured and confident? Why did he have to be a completely different person to the one James remembered, yet still painfully the same?

Severus silently shook his head, smirking slightly in a satisfied sort of way that made James wonder exactly what was going on in the man's mind. Had he gone mad or did he still feel... No it was impossible.

"Of course you don't, so get out before I do something I'll regret." James nodded towards the door. "Unless you want to hand yourself in."

"I don't think so." A glint of mirth sprung to Severus' eyes, but a moment later it was masked and he took a deliberate step backwards, snatching his mask from the table.

"You had to know I'd have no possible reason to believe you," James said, allowing a little incredulity into his voice. "Voldemort had to know that before he sent you out as a spy-"

"I am not a spy," Severus interjected, a hint of frustration in his voice now. There was almost a flicker of panic in his eyes as he shot a dark look at the Death Eater pictures around them, and lowered his voice. "I am here by my own means, that you must believe. For Lily's sake, you must prepare, and adequately. I can provide aid-"

"Get out," James repeated, yet again. "Don't do this. Please. Just... don't. It's not fair."

"Not... fair?" Severus repeated the word faintly and with deep venom. "I know the meaning of that particular word, Potter, and it does not sit well. You saw to that. Perhaps I should not have come. Perhaps this... was unwise."

Severus looked at him, and James became aware of how very distraught he must seem, and Severus' cold, hard front was not helping in the slightest. If he'd ever intended to retain his pride, he'd failed miserably. He expected further humiliation, or even torture, but Severus merely continued to hold his gaze, staring with an expression James didn't dare to analyse.

"I thought that..." Severus begun again, but brought himself to a abrupt halt. Turning away, he flipped his mask through his fingers and placed it on his face. "Regardless, Potter, I hope I have made myself clear. If not... I daresay we shall both suffer the consequences."

James closed his eyes as the man apparated with a crack, and slipped back into his chair with a shiver. Gradually, he opened his eyes and swallowed heavily, shaking his head as he condemned himself for the most pathetic display of his life.

He stared at the spot where Severus had disappeared, his heart slowing to its usual pace. He didn't realise he was shaking like a madman until he picked up his quill and tried to write. James scowled and wiped at his mouth aggressively, wishing to eliminate all traces of the man.

This was not the last time he'd be seeing Severus again, that was for sure. He should have killed him when he had the chance. Now all he had to do was build himself up, so when the time came

again, he'd have moved on, with the ability to strike without hesitation.

## Chapter 18

James stared stonily into the living room fire, mind churning over, debating the validity of Severus' confession. A series of clanging ranging from the direction of the kitchen was a constant reminder that his wife was busy preparing dinner. He was not oblivious to the fact that the unnecessary noise was a rather unsubtle cue that he should be helping, or at least sharing the space so that Lily was not at a loss for company.

Harry had been tucked up in bed, with his toys cleared away into their relative boxes, leaving the couple to a potentially peaceful evening alone. James smiled fondly, surprising himself with the magnitude of affection he experienced as he recalled Harry gripping his finger in his own small palm, as he'd been lowered carefully into his crib.

Though James could not help but withdraw from the intimacy, he was sure this child would grow on him. The paternal love he instinctively felt would outweigh any regret he'd suffered on allowing Lily to talk him into allowing pregnancy so soon into their marriage.

He would not give Severus the satisfaction of knowing he'd inadvertently begun a stream of festering insecurities that prevented James from having a healthy relationship with his son.

If he dared himself to believe it, James would've accused Lily of using the responsibility of a baby as a means by which to tie him to her indefinitely. But as things were, James could hardly begrudge her when she'd given him one thing in his life he felt he would be able to love, without restraint or shame. It would be unconditional.

James eyed the many pictures of his family atop the mantelpiece, condemning his own blank expression while Lily spun their child round in circles with helpless giggles. He had barely breached the frame, but stood to the side, as though he were not really one of them and appearing almost dazed.

Returning his gaze to the fire, where he felt most comfortable, James mulled over the depressing fact that the house was already beginning to feel like a prison, despite the fact that Dumbledore had to officially declare them in hiding.

This is not how things would be, he decided, with an unsympathetic sneer at himself. Harry deserved his full attention, as did his wife.

James wondered where Severus was now, and with whom. Was he already relaying their encounter to Voldemort? Had he got what he came for? If not, how soon would he deign in safe to return?

James shuddered as the room dimmed out of focus, his eyes glazing over as he lost himself in memory far outside the walls of his home. He could recall, only too clearly, the pure coldness in Severus' eyes as they'd aggressively conversed a week ago. It was a lack of empathy he should have expected, yet it still chilled him to the core.

Could it be possible that Severus' loyalty to the Dark Lord was waning, at least enough to allow him the freedom to approach a member of the Order? James could hope, but feared his optimism was merely a result of deeply wishful thinking. It would be only too ideal if Severus had finally seen the error of his ways, when he'd delved so far past the point of forgiveness.

Regardless, if Voldemort was indeed set on destroying the Potters, there seemed very little he could do about it.

"What's got you so pensive?" Lily asked from the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. She appeared mildly annoyed as she glanced over her husband, sprawled across the couch while sweat was gathering on her cheeks as she completed the chores alone.

James blinked at the interruption, but did not remove his gaze from the fire. "Just... thinking," he replied tightly.

A small sigh of defeat successfully gathered his attention, giving James just enough time to see Lily drop her eyes to the floor, growing more weary as her frustration was refused an outlet. If it was something she'd learnt, it was that James never provoked an argument. If Lily lost her temper, it was near impossible for her to raise James to the same bait. It ensured, rather regrettably, that each and every problem they faced as a couple remained unchallenged, allowing it to swell unchecked in the silence.

Forcing himself very much into the present, James shifted himself into a sitting position and beckoned Lily onto the couch beside him, upturning his lips in an attempt to appear encouraging. No matter his mood, his wife deserved his respect. It was the least he could give her in the circumstances.

James tried to ignore the soft, familiar music that filled the room as Lily absently twirled her wand and curled up at his side. The prolonged quiet on both their parts was more tense than comfortable, as it should have been.

Finally, Lily lifted her head from James' shoulder and guided his face towards her. What she saw there, written all too clearly in the deep lines, seemed to displease her, for she frowned and shifted up until she was leaning away from him.

"Lily..." James begun, aware of the apology in his voice but unsure of how to go about explaining, or even comprehending the degree to which he had let her down.

"No. It's ok..." Lily stopped him, before his soft tone could turn into a false comfort. "I know things have been... difficult for you recently. And for us."

James remained silent, neither embracing her attempt to converse over such a sensitive subject, or actively dismissing it.

As Lily pushed her hair back from her face and took a steady breath, James forced himself to retain eye contact and openly acknowledge the misery she was attempting to conceal. An unhappiness that he had caused.

"But, I'm going to ask you something, okay? I need to... "

James brought his palm to her cheek, impulsively, and ran the pad of his thumb across her lip. Despite the many, exceedingly unfair grudges he held against his wife, she had to know how much he cared about her. "Ask me."

Lily inhaled softly and met his gaze, silently pleading. "Make love to me?"

James closed his eyes.

How much longer could he go on denying her? Wasn't it his duty, as a husband, to ensure that satisfied his wife, in all areas? Was she really that repulsive that he could not even tolerate the idea?

James wouldn't go as far as to blame his lack of sex drive entirely on one man, but he was not

oblivious to the fact that he needed to get over Severus in order to give Lily all the attention that she so needed. This... obsession would destroy him, and his marriage. He should have left Severus behind all those years ago. He should have accepted Remus' tentative suggestions that he needed counselling, or at least to give his thoughts some air. But no, he had shut himself down and this was the result. All lingering thoughts and memory of the man had only become a heavy burden.

Before James could respond verbally, Lily had discarded her apron and taken hold of his wrists. "Make this work." She gestured between them and gave a brave smile. "We have problems, I know, but I can make you happy. You just have to let the past go."

Lily was not oblivious to the moment when the shutters fell across James' face, as she knew they would. "No," she protested, gripping him more firmly. "We can't keep avoiding this. When you're at work, be at work, be as angry and bitter as you like, but when you're at home, just... be my husband. Be here for me."

James opened his mouth to respond, frowning his discomfort, but Lily quietened him. It seemed she had been stealing herself to say this for a long while. "Love me like I know you can. You can't live your life looking backwards, regretting... despising yourself. Stop wallowing in your own self pity, James Potter and... let him go."

James stiffened at her words, his throat tightening as he fought back the unexplainable wave of emotion that consumed him as she pressed deliberately against his sore points.

"This is destroying you," Lily added quietly, not allowing James the small movement it would take to look away. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Apparently willing to wait for a decisive answer, Lily sat back patiently on her heels and watched her husband make his decision.

Finally, after a tense few minutes, James opened his eyes and gave a small nod, willing away the chill that had seeped across his body. He wanted to confess everything, to admit the true pain that was coursing through him, but all he managed was a soft, "Okay."

Lily appeared taken aback, clearly having expected further refusal. "Okay?" she repeated carefully, searching his face for any kind of doubt.

James nodded more firmly and leaned down and kissed her for confirmation, cupping her face in his hands. It was the first intimate contact they had shared, aside from quick pecks and the brush of hands, in longer than either could remember.

When they pulled apart, Lily's face was flushed, her lips slightly swollen. With determination, James brought his hands to her sides and lifted her top over her head in one swift, decisive movement and smiled as Lily flushed, almost shyly.

And then Lily's hands were all over him, greedily mapping out his body without restraint. Her mouth was hot and wet against James' neck, her hands exploring the expanse of his chest. And he allowed her to, resting back against the cushions behind him and concentrating on not tensing up.

Lily moved to straddle his lap, pressing downwards, and James was helpless to his body's reactions. Even if, internally, he felt violated and exceedingly uncomfortable with the pressure of her tongue on his skin, and fingers in his hair, his body had been denied such a touch for longer than it should for a young man. He wanted this. He did. He wanted to forget that this wasn't the way things were supposed to be, and accept all that she was offering.

He slipped a finger into his briefs breathlessly, eyes dark and restless with anticipation. He knew a part of him would enjoy this, very much, if he only allowed himself to, and hated himself for still feeling as though this wasn't what he was made for. This was his wife. He had chosen this woman. Made vows. He could do to her as he pleased.

They were broken apart before James could wriggle out of his boxers by a sharp knock at the door.

"Typical," Lily sighed, pressing their foreheads together before reluctantly pulling away from the heat of the body beneath her to re-dress. "The one time my husband decides to get it out, we get interrupted."

James gave a wry smile and sat forward, taking a deep, calming breath.

"Don't move," Lily instructed, as she moved swiftly towards the front door, smoothing down her hair with her fingers.

James sat patiently as his blood pressure returned to normal. He was so consumed with an impeding headache, as he rested his head heavily in his hands, that he did not immediately register the unnerving quietness proceeding Lily's departure.

Gradually, James raised his head and listened. A bubble of anxiety erupted inside of him as only silence greeted the sound of the wards becoming undone.

There was no greeting passed through the locks. No familiar voices or hurried goodbyes.

"Lily," he called, preparing to stand. "Is everything ok?"

A moment later, James breathed out a sigh of relief as the door clicked shut and Lily returned.

No longer flushed, her cheeks were pale. There was no traces of a smile left on the soft lines of her face. In fact, she looked strangely guarded, despite her actions just minutes previously.

"Who was it?" James asked curiously, growing worried once again when he was subjected to hesitation.

Lily turned her face back towards the door and held out a hand. "You can come in. I wouldn't have opened the door otherwise."

James' apprehension returned tenfold when, out of the shadows of the landing, the last person he wanted to see took a deliberate step forwards.

"Severus," he croaked, suddenly all too aware of the strain against his trousers, beginning to wilter, but still all too visible.

"Good evening." Severus gave a tight nod, displaying surprisingly adequate manners considering the hostility of their last meeting.

Flushing as instantly as the man's dark eyes dropped to his lap, James snapped his legs closed and began a frantic search for his t-shirt.

Just as he was overturning a cushion, the garment was held out before him. James accepted it from Severus with all the grace he could manage, remaining on his feet as he pulled it over his head, all the while trying to ignore a pair of dark eyes on his back. 'Fat,' Severus had called him, not a week ago.

James straightened up and, by habit, gave the man a once over, unable to conceal the fact that, once again, he'd been caught completely off guard. At least Severus appeared cleaner than he had before. His face was free of grime, as was his hair and his robes were so far relatively clean, though he was also considerably pale. He looked ill.

"Take a seat, Severus," Lily offered, eyes glued to the black clad figure dominating the small space. "We were just..."

"I think I can imagine," Severus replied smoothly, without a hint of discomfort, taking the space James had recently vacated. Dark eyes scanned the room with unbidden curiosity, as James and Lily shared similar expressions of disbelief.

"Wait a minute," James cut in, eyeing Severus' comfortable position on his couch with distrust. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I think you know," Severus replied calmly, before turning to Lily. "I trust your husband did not allow you insight into our... meeting a week ago."

Lily turned to James with a curious expression. "No, he didn't. But then again, he doesn't really tell me a lot anymore."

"Lily," James took a deliberate step towards her, flashing daggers at Severus. "A word. In the kitchen. Now."

"But-"

"I'll get Harry," James interrupted forcefully. "And you," he pointed at the man, glaring with extreme disdain. "Move so much as an inch, and I'll have every auror from here to Mexico with a wand pointed at your face."

With that, he turned on his heel and marched towards the bedroom, rousing a sleepy Harry into distressed whimpers, and taking a short cut to the kitchen, where Lily stood against the side board, obviously thrown.

"I know what you're going to say-" she begun as soon as he walked through the door, but James cut her off with a wave of irritation.

"You let a known Death Eater into our home. Severus Snape no less. And Harry is here for god's sake. Harry. We know full well what Voldemort has planned-" James snapped, in a furious whisper, holding his son tightly to his chest.

"Oh, so it's 'Harry' now is it," Lily hissed back, conscious of their guest in the next room. "Finally realised he has a name-"

"You're worried about that, when we have Snape sitting in our living room," James exclaimed incredulously, gesturing impatiently towards the door. "What on earth did he say for you to let him in?"

"He didn't have to say anything! We were friends at school. He would never!"

"Lily, he's a murderer," James explained slowly, as though speaking to a small child. "You read the exact same paper that I do. Whoever you thought he used to be... that's not him anymore. That man is dangerous. What about that don't you understand? As far as we know, he wants us dead just as much as Voldemort does. His little death squad could be arriving any minute."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lily argued, though she sounded less certain. "Severus would never hurt us, James. You know that. You two used to-"

"No, I don't know that," James shook his head firmly, refusing to be drawn into that conversation when they'd both pointedly avoided it for years. "And neither do you."

Lily crossed her arms over her chest, looking thoroughly upset. It had not escaped her notice that this was the most emotional she'd seen ever seen James since they'd wed. "I just want-"

"I know," James sighed, using his free arm to rub a comforting pattern on her shoulder. "But he's not the same man you remember. Look, I know seeing him again has probably surprised you... Believe me, I know. I went through the same thing last week. But we have to take precautions. Now, take Harry and I'll call Albus."

A muffled, but unmistakable crash came from the living room and James' eyes widened. "Screw that," he snarled, whipping around. "I'll take him out myself."

Bundling Harry across to his wife, James drew his wand and stalked back to the living room, heart pounding in his ears.

Having expected Severus to have broken a window, or attempted to remove the wards, he was taken aback to find the man in the center of the room, standing over a broken vase, arms suspended in front of him.

Severus spun round when James closed the door behind him, eyes wide.

"It was... an accident," he explained, folding his hands behind his back. "I was merely-"

"What? Just smelling the geranium? Of course," James replied sarcastically, repairing the damage with a flick of his wand. "Now you can leave, before you mess up anything else."

Severus sighed, eyes flickering with annoyance. "Back to this. I had thought you'd take more sincerity from my earlier warning, Potter."

James' eyes flashed. "You should never have come here. Turning up at my home was an insult, Snape. I can't trust you. Not with my son in the house. Not with Lily in the next room. You want to fight with me, we take this outside."

"If that were my wish, surely the Dark Lord would have followed me here," Severus responded coldly. "As you can see, once again, I come alone."

"I told you before. I don't wait to hear your lies. And how did you find us?" James narrowed his eyes, refusing to accept the likely truth behind Severus insistence.

"That doesn't matter," Severus dismissed. "The fact that you remain alive is all that is important to secure your trust in me."

"Look, are you trying to-"

At that moment, the door was opened and both men grew quiet. Lily stepped through and James was glad to note she had remembered to bring her wand. Still, he could not hide his exasperation.

"Lily," he sighed, rubbing a finger at his temples. "Do you have a death wish?"

She shook her head absently, but her gaze was focused on Severus, "I knew you would come.

Eventually," she said quietly. "All these years... You turned your back on all of us, Severus."

Severus watched his old friend with a guarded expression, appearing very much as though he would've liked to step back, but he stood his ground.

"I can't pretend to condone what you've done, Severus..." Lily continued, face hard, "but if you're here looking for a second chance- "

"No," James hissed, but Lily was already stepping forward with greater urgency, her eyes deep and searching.

As Lily raised a hand to Severus' pale face, James twitched involuntary with a sudden, overwhelming urge to tug her back. "The photos really don't do you justice, do they? You look awful." She grimaced for a moment as she fingered a greasy lock, but then a genuine smile broke through, full of hesitant affection. "I never thought you'd grow so tall."

Severus stiffened as Lily gave a small, private smile and wrapped her arms around his shoulders with a sigh.

Then, with his eyes locked on James, with something very akin to fear, Severus placed a hand on the small of her back and drew her closer, accepting the embrace.

James felt an uncomfortable twinge in his stomach and watched the intimate exchange stonily, arms crossed over his chest.

"Lily," Severus murmured finally, gently easing her back. "I believe... I have a lot of explaining to do."

Lily nodded in eager agreement, and then, with the balling of her fists the only split second warning, punched Severus hard round the face. Once she'd struck, she breathed out a deep sigh of satisfaction, appearing far more at ease.

"That feels better. I've been wanting to do that for a long time. Ever since you ran away from Hogwarts, and never came back. And don't think I won't do it again, and much worse if you haven't come to say what I want to hear."

Severus, having flinched in pain as his cheek turned a dull red, glared disapprovingly down at her as he rubbed at the mark.

Instinctively, though he could not condone why, he glanced over at James as he prepared himself for further assault, as though expecting the man to attain some sort of control over the woman in his defense, but James merely smirked and nodded approvingly towards his wife.

Sneering distastefully, Severus dropped his hand and hardened his features. It had not been his intention to arrive with any sort of promises to align himself with Dumbledore.

Indeed, he had grown uncomfortable operating under the Dark Lord, with his twisted mind games and obsessive killing patterns and fondness for torture, even of his most loyal, but he'd yet to receive an alternative means of survival.

He had acknowledged, however, that by aiding this family, he had disobeyed his master, and therefore, had already taken the first step back towards the light. But it was not Lily's encouragement he needed.

"Door's that way," James stated plainly into the following silence, motioning towards the exit.

"Don't let us keep you."

"I think we should at least hear what he has to say—" Lily begun, jumping into Severus' defense before the man could respond.

James shrugged her off irritably. "Well, you do that. I'll be in the kitchen, preparing for whatever attack he has planned."

"Who are we if we turn him away, James?" Lily asked after him, imploring her husband to appreciate her position. "Albus would do the exact same thing if he turned up on his doorstep. Let him speak. Please."

James' jaw worked furiously as he stared down at Lily. "Albus would have him sentenced to Azkaban in a heartbeat."

"No," Lily disagreed quietly. "He would offer the man a second chance... Just like he did you."

With extreme discomfort, James eventually relented to Lily's stubborn plea, knowing only too well whatever argument he proposed would make no difference to her decision. She would only witness first hand, after all, what a scumbag the man was, just as he had, and then this would be over.

"Wand," he instructed, reluctantly turning to Severus and holding out his palm.

Severus raised an eyebrow, but nevertheless obeyed the command, slipping a slender hand into an outer pocket of his robes.

"Now speak," James said, giving the man a cold look as he snatched the offering from him. "But I don't want to hear it."

Lily sighed as the door snapped shut loudly behind James, Harry's cries predictably following.

Severus stared blandly at the door, ignoring Lily's insistence that he join her on the sofa. He'd assumed that James had moved on and gotten the life he'd always wanted, after they'd parted ways, but it seemed that this dream was having its hiccups. All was not dandy in the Potter household - The very thought that had been tormenting him since he'd heard of the infamous marriage.

Quite strangely, he found himself almost remorseful for further compromising the shaky relationship between husband and wife. As much as he loathed James for his obvious success in life, he was not so selfish as to grant himself the right to destroy it.

He cleared his throat, turning his calculating gaze onto Lily. "I apologise. It was not my intention to create a dispute—"

"Not at all. I'm glad you came." Lily attempted to smile, but it came out more as a pained grimace. "James is just... well he..." Lily sighed, frustrated and patted the seat beside her more firmly. "Any mention of you and he gets like this."

Frowning slightly, Severus attempted to discern the reasoning behind this unlikely assumption as he sat down stiffly, folding his robes beneath him.

"You hurt him, Severus. Pretty badly," Lily continued quietly, glancing nervously in the direction of the kitchen. "You probably know, but he blames himself for you joining Voldemort."

Severus snorted softly, though his eyes were intense, betraying his curiosity. "He always did have a flare for the dramatic."

Lily shook her head sadly, unsure why she felt the sudden need for Severus to understand this. "He's not a happy man. He needs closure, so that he can move on, and he's not getting that the whole time you're out there doing goodness knows what."

Severus gave into a small shudder, casting such thoughts to the side so that he could make the true reasons for his visit clear. "Regardless, I am not here to discuss Potter's... well-being. I am here to warn you that the Dark Lord shall, in the near future, attempt to take all that you hold dear."

"And what are you suggesting we do?" Lily asked without hesitation, tensing up and unconsciously fingering her wand in her pocket. "Dumbledore has warned us that we're on You Know Who's... list." She flinched briefly, but met Severus' gaze head on. "You know of a way to keep Harry safe?"

Severus straightened his spine and flicked back the sleeve of his robes as he prepared an answer. "I cannot be certain of a means..." he replied slowly, willing himself not to make fanciful promises he had no possible way to keep. "... But I could hide you. I know of a place the Dark Lord would never suspect. It is mine alone and you would never be found. Allow my time here to remain a secret, and the Dark Lord shall not be aware that I have behaved disloyally. He would have no reason to expect me, of all people, to conceal you from him."

"And afterwards? If this works, and we're saved, you'll leave him? You'll join the Order?"

Severus appeared hesitant, which was all the response Lily needed to scowl at him. "Then we don't need your help. I won't accept it if you haven't changed."

Severus sighed deeply as Lily rose to her feet, and began pacing in front of the fireplace.

"I suppose we could compromise," he suggested wearily. "I confess, my intention has not been to serve the Dark Lord until he claims his unholy empire, for it shall not be long. He and I do not share similar... tastes, when it comes to a great many things. Given the opportunity, I believe it would not be difficult for me to dislodge myself from his inner circle, aside from the obvious."

"Like what?"

Severus snorted at her naivety. "Torture. You cannot believe I could escape without punishment."

Lily paled as she considered this fact. "You know, I tried not to think about you being there... experiencing all the horrific things you undoubtedly were. We heard stories at school..." She shuddered for a long moment, before deciding to divert from this track of thought. "You were my friend, Severus. How could you do that to me? How could you just... leave?"

Without breaking eye contact, Severus rose to his feet and attempted to string together a series of most probable excuses. She had been, after all, a loyal friend throughout his school life. He owed her an explanation at least, even if he could promise no immediate plans to seek redemption. "Hogwarts was no longer my home. I... I believed the path my life must take was clear."

Swallowing thickly, Lily lowered her gaze towards him, showing sympathy for the first time. "All because of James?"

"No," Severus snapped, after a tense pause in which the brief emotion that had shown through his grim exterior was covered once more by an impassive mask. "I had my reasons."

Lily appeared to want to ask more, but wisely decided against prodding any further. She knew better than to anger him. "And now?" she asked instead, closely searching his face. "What are your plans?"

Severus stared at her so long Lily began to feel extremely uncomfortable. This was not the timid young boy she'd known from school. No, this man was an entirely different person. And one that she could not predict.

"Just accept my assistance," Severus responded finally. "I will attempt to contact Dumbledore with a similar pledge, so you shall hardly be betraying him."

"So then you shall be our secret keeper," Lily nodded hesitantly, and Severus appeared pleased with the move forwards.

"Not that Sirius, the greatest friend of our Quidditch Captain wouldn't be able to keep a secret, but there are far too many holes in Dumbledore's plans for my comfort..."

"Severus... James doesn't speak to Sirius anymore," Lily said quietly, gently interrupting him. "He wouldn't help us."

Raising an eyebrow, Severus frowned in ill comprehension. "Excuse me?"

"Well, after... what happened, Sirius tried, time and again, to reconcile things between himself and James. It wasn't until his best friend went on... mourning you, that he realised what you two had wasn't trivial, it wasn't a joke or a fabrication of real love or infatuation... but real. I think Sirius really was sorry to destroy something that meant so much to his best friend."

Lily continued sadly. "I think Sirius was keen to join the Order, but he didn't dare when James was so actively involved. Since then, he just sort of... disappeared. I know he does some sort of resistance work, but apart from that, he keeps pretty much to himself."

"And Lupin?" Severus asked hesitantly, imagining the despondent scene with disgust.

"Yeah, he's in the Order too. See quite a lot of him. Don't tell James, but Remus keeps contact with Sirius. Not much mind you, but I think Remus likes to check up on him. Unlike James, he's not so blinded by such... disappointment that he can't see the childish fault for what it was. After all, Sirius waited until he was sure you... loved James before acting." Severus flinched heavily at the term, but made no move to interrupt. "He really did think he was acting for the best. He's not a cruel man."

Severus gave an ungraceful snort, but Lily ignored him. "I think you should talk to James. In fact, I was planning on visiting a friend tonight. I won't be here to... interfere."

"I do not think-"

"No, you need to do this." Lily was firm. Before Severus could protest any further, she had slipped into her coat. "Besides, I am hardly going to fully accept your proposal until James is entirely ok with it, so you better get convincing him. I'll leave you two dinner, and you can babysit Harry-"

"Wait," Severus prevented her from leaving immediately. He lowered his voice and allowed his gaze to drift across her face more slowly, taking in the once familiar features. "No need to run, Lily. There is much more that I am... curious about."

Lily sighed, but nodded as she pulled on her shoes, smiling slightly as she acknowledged Severus use of her first name.

"You forgave Potter for what he did to me? You, of all people," Severus asked in a rush, letting lose the one unbelievable fact that had continued to puzzle him.

Lily tightened her lips and nodded once again. "Yeah. God knows why anymore, but I love that man, Severus. He never meant to hurt you that day. James explained everything to me, and unlike you, I believed him. Eventually. At the beginning yes, he was stupid enough to want to hurt you, but he really did love you and I don't think he ever..."

"Ever what?" Severus asked sharply, heart beat picking up to an alarming pace.

"Nothing." Lily gave a forced smile. "That's between you two. I have... I need to go out. Have a nice evening. And please, sort out all this unfinished business so that we can all move on, in whatever direction that may be."

With that, she disappeared into the kitchen.

Severus could hear soft voices, but had no will to hear what they spoke of. He remained in the center of the room, arms stiff at his sides. A moment later, Lily re-appeared, shooting him a nervous glance before heading out of the front door without another word.

"That can't have gone well," James commented dryly when Severus stepped into the kitchen.

"It was all I could have hoped for," Severus counteracted lightly, watching as James lifted himself from the chair he'd been sitting in. He felt entirely out of place, his position in the Potter's home now seeming somewhat entirely inappropriate now that he had come to say what he needed to.

He only wished to leave, and analyse all that Lily had given him to think about. It seemed he'd been living under false pretenses for the past three years, assuming so naively that his effect on James' life had only been minimal. Added with James' most intimate memories and thoughts he'd viewed just a week ago - the ones that had plagued his dreams ever since - Severus found himself stripped of many vital defenses.

James snorted, placing Harry in his cot and trying to ignore the way Severus eyes were drawn to the infant with avid curiosity. "She took her pajamas. She won't be coming back until tomorrow."

Severus chose not to respond, standing rather awkwardly in the small space of James' kitchen and trying not to become too unnerved by the baby in the corner, who for some reason's very presence made him very uncomfortable.

"Cup of tea?" James asked finally, with mock politeness. "Or have you finally decided to leave?"

"Why are you being so aggressive?" Severus asked with a frown.

"Why are you being so damn calm?" James returned, angry with Severus for not appearing at all affected by being in his presence, when it was wracking him with anxiety. "In case you haven't realised, you're not a nice person. You don't have my respect anymore."

Severus tightened his lips and narrowed his eyes. "Would you prefer that I shout? That I demean myself to your pettiness. A repeat performance of our last meeting would hardly be productive."

"I'd prefer you to be honest with me," James stated bluntly, flicking on the kettle. "Tell me why you are here."

"To save you!" Severus seethed, his impatience finally overcoming him. "You ungrateful, melodramatic man. Because I could not live knowing..."

James stared at him, fingers clenched against the worktop that stood like a barrier between them, daring him to continue, though fearing what he would hear. "Knowing what?"

Severus tightened his jaw and turned away.

"Oh, that's it. Look away and ignore the obvious question," James growled in frustration.  
"Coward."

A glare plastered itself to Severus' face with the accusation. "I could have you bound and gagging within seconds, Potter, so I suggest you watch your tongue."

Before James could retaliate with something equally an venomous, making such an act necessary, Severus held out his hand. "Just pass me my wand and I shall leave," he demanded curtly. "I won't impose on your hospitality any longer."

James rolled his eyes, knowing this was his only chance to get this over, once and for all. "Just sit down. That's why Lily left. She knows we need to... talk. If I stand a chance of making my marriage work, I need to... understand a few things."

Severus appeared extremely reluctant, but obediently folded himself into a chair. He still needed to gain James' trust, after all, however hard it appeared, in order to keep the insufferable man and his family out of harms way.

"Are you really considering leaving Voldemort to join us? Dumbledore and the Order?" James asked plainly, pushed a cup of steaming liquid towards Severus.

James put no pressure on the question, which gave Severus no idea which answer was desired. He pressed his back against the chair and eyed James with all the indifference he could muster, while his heart was a painful reminder, battering against his ribcage, that he had never been any less so.

"Perhaps," he responded vaguely. Just ask me to, Severus thought wearily, and my answer would be that much more simple.

"Well, we have the whole night it seems. Maybe we'll get more decisive answers by the morning." James watched Severus closely as he brought his cup to his lips, a challenge in his eye.

## Chapter 19

Snape flinched under the intentness of James' gaze. Dear god, the man was serious.

What on earth did he want? It was perfectly obvious that, despite many repressed fantasies, James had no realistic intention of attempting to get him back. And never again would they be friends. Therefore, Severus saw no logical reason why their meetings should not remain as infrequent and impersonal as possible.

"What do you want from me?" he asked sceptically. "If this is some form of punishment-"

"It's not," James assured him firmly, glad that the other man could not see how hard his hands were clenching the underside of the table. His confidence around Severus was frail at best. His anger had got him this far, but he doubted it would carry him through much further. "But you did barge into my home after three years of silence. I think you owe me an explanation of what you've been up to. Or at least a few hints about how you managed to undergo a complete personality transplant in such a short while."

"So you can turn me in with a lifetime sentence? I think not," Snape answered tersely, preparing to stand.

James' lips tightened in impatience. "You'll get what you deserve, I can promise you that, but right now, I just want answers. For me. Not for any report. I'll swear on it if you like."

"Hm," Severus sneered, eyeing the other man with disdain. "Why not make the Unbreakable Vow?"

It was James' turn to flinch, momentarily thrown. His face closed up, underlined with self-disgust. After a lengthy pause, he shifted back into a more comfortable position and leveled a stare at Severus.

"That wasn't funny. I just want... need to fill in some blanks in my mind. I'm asking you to help me do that. Just... for the sake of decency."

When Severus remained, by all outward signs, totally impassive, James groaned quietly and rubbed a hand over his face in frustration. He had no idea how to deal with this man. None at all. The old Severus he knew, but this... creature in front of him, barely seemed human. His emotions were locked away so tightly, it seemed it would take nothing short of a crowbar, and limitless patience to persuade him into a willing, civil conversation.

James had been waiting for this opportunity for a long while, predicted the difficulties, but never had he assumed the awkwardness between them would be derived of such a personal distance from one another. But then again, they never had found it easy to connect on an emotional level. Not even when dating.

Taking a deep breath, James spoke quickly, with the intention of finishing this as soon as possible. "Why did you join Voldemort? Was it - Was there more than one reason?"

"Any why the sudden interest?" Snape snapped irritably. He pulled his cloak more tightly around himself and eyed the other man with suspicion. "You could have asked long before now. As you said, it has been three years."

He'd never allowed himself to indulge in the anger and humiliation he'd felt when James had made

no further attempt to contact him after the night of the Ball. Though his decision was final, he'd almost expected James to continue hounding him regardless. Almost wanted him to. But the Gryffindor had just given up.

James coughed his indignation, his brows knitting together into an abrupt frown. His palms hit the table with a slap. "But I did. Of course I did. I wrote to you every day for at least a year. It was only when I left Hogwarts that I took your silence for what it was. You never replied. Not once."

"I never received a letter," Severus responded curtly, the perfect picture of indifference. "I never heard a whisper from you, Potter."

James, however, allowed his responding anger full reign. "What? Not one?"

Heart hammering with this sudden, unnerving revelation, Severus briefly shook his head. A year? He was hard pressed to convince himself this didn't make any difference. If he'd have known James had been so persistent... "Not that it matters—"

"It does matter," James hissed, casting his eyes upwards. "I'll kill Dumbledore. It was him, I'm sure. All those hints about how I should leave you be... How I was messed up enough already." James swore loudly and Severus' eyes widened in surprise at James' extreme reaction.

"If he hadn't... We may still... I might've... Damn you, Albus."

James appeared so upset by the idea that Severus was overcome with a sudden, reckless desire to comfort the man in some small form. The very fact that James still cared enough to consider such a thing important was enough to blow his mind.

He cleared his throat, casting his eyes about the immaculate kitchen in an attempt to distract himself from the inevitable. The smell of Sheppard's Pie inhaled into his senses. It had been a while since he'd experienced a decent meal.

"Perhaps a mailing error?"

James scoffed, shaking his head. "Don't think so somehow..."

Severus bit the inside of his cheek as he watched James' torn expression, before he could allow more sincere emotions to slip to the surface. It had been a while since he'd felt such... emotion. He had not been close to another human being since he'd lost James, and to have memories resurface and slowly consume him was making him extremely uncomfortable..

"I'm sorry if you thought that I didn't..." James begun uncertainly, watching Severus' impassive face warily. "I mean, you must have thought I didn't care."

Severus gave a subtle shrug of the shoulders, tilting his face towards the window. "It has left no lasting scars I can assure you."

James swallowed heavily, but could not draw the confidence to call Severus' bluff, if it were such. Perhaps the man was being honest. Perhaps he, James, was the only emotional wreck in this room.

Before he could dwell too much on the thought, James stood abruptly and made towards the oven. "Well, Lily made dinner. I suppose we better eat it—"

"No." Severus made to stand up, this time with more conviction, feeling rather sick. He had indulged James enough this evening. "If that is all—"

James also rose to his feet, his face clearing of its previous confusion to register mild panic. "Not yet."

Severus sighed heavily as he drew himself up to his full height, and stared down at the other man. He shouldn't be here. It wasn't right. He'd cast James from his mind for years... worked so hard to forget him, to convince himself he no longer cared. He wouldn't allow his hard work to be ruined by James' selfish need to clear his own mind.

"Why?" he hissed.

"Because this isn't over," James explained in a rush, gesturing impatiently between them. "This... thing between me and you. And I can't move on until it is, so just sit down."

"I assure you, to whatever you are referring, I bear no part."

James shook his head grimly. He rubbed a hand over his face, and with an almost fearful glance towards his son's sleeping form in the corner, he pointed Severus back into his seat.

"You are not honestly expecting me to bear you the entire of my secrets, Potter?" Severus sneered, though he found himself sinking back into his chair, wary, albeit intrigued about where this was headed.

"Not everything," James answered hesitantly. "But we were friends once, weren't we? A little catch up won't hurt anyone."

Severus' eyes narrowed.

"You, me... talking," James explained, gesturing between them and speaking slowly, taking Severus' silence for confusion. "We parted on bad terms. I think it's time we... wrapped things up."

"This is ridiculous," Snape snapped, though he made no further move to escape. "I am not here to help you deal with your childish issues..."

"My childish issues?" James retorted, lowering his voice as Harry shifted restlessly in his crib. He glared at Severus, bewildered by his own feelings for this man, when he was so obviously someone to be avoided. He wasn't his Severus anymore. This was an older, bitterer version who would not be persuaded. "You're the one who can't even sit through a cup of tea."

"Perhaps I am not in the mood for tea," Snape retorted, hating that James could reduce him to such impatience.

"Then have a scotch." Reaching up above his head, James pulled down a thin green bottle and rolled it across the table.

Severus glanced at the bubbly contents with a moment's hesitation, before snatching it up and downing it two large gulps. The glass hit the table with a thud as he wiped his mouth.

"I am over you, Potter," he declared firmly, ignoring James' tiny wince at the finality in his tone. "Whatever you are suggesting-"

"I'm not suggesting that we... that you and I," James spoke hurriedly, forcing a short laugh. It sounded horribly fake, even to his own ears. "Just let me... apologise. Please. I need to get this off my chest. Let me do it. For old time's sake. Then you can go home and back to your own life."

Severus snorted softly, but with a lingering glance at James' poorly concealed desperation, leaned

back in his chair with a resigned sigh. "Be quick."

James nodded. "Okay..." He drew his lips together briefly as he considered how exactly to put this. He only wanted to do this once. "I... Things happened between us, a long while ago, and for whatever part I played in your decision to recruit with Voldemort, I am sincerely sorry. I acted foolishly and I betrayed your trust in the most vile manner-"

"Is that all?" Severus interrupted, arms crossed over his chest. "Because it is a pathetic attempt at a reconciliation, Potter."

"I'm not trying to...to make amends," James hissed in frustration. He thought he saw a flicker of disappointment, or at least surprise cross Severus face, but the man made no move to speak again. "We're way beyond that. You screwed up that chance when you threw any chance of redemption straight into the gutter. I'm doing this for my own conscience. So Lily and I can move on, and be a proper family. I can't be a decent father to Harry when you're in my head, poisoning everything. I can't function without yo- without knowing I've settled the past."

Severus' dark eyes were unreadable as they passed across James' face, registering the creases, the premature wrinkles, the scars of deep stress over a long period. To think that this man - the man he'd fallen for so helplessly in his youth - had been sitting in this house and dreaming only of him, obsessing even, when Severus had been, in rather more uncomfortable circumstances, sleeping under canvas and suffering the same ordeal.

James was deeply miserable, and it was slowly sapping any potential enjoyment he was offered by life. And all because of him?

Severus blinked and dropped his gaze to the table, almost overwhelmed by the power of his own disappointment. Would he have returned to James, knowing that the man did not hate him for his crimes? That he still, amazingly, had the ability to look upon him with repressed admiration, after all that he'd done in the name of evil.

Bitterness and hate could only stand so long against the more powerful, aching sensation in his chest he seemed to get whenever he and James occupied the same room.

James shook his head helplessly, and something inside of Severus snapped. He leaned forwards in his chair with a snarl, until the other man had met his furious gaze.

"Listen, Potter, for I shall only say this once," he begun, keeping his voice low. "Look around you. A great number of wizards would envy your position. A wife, a child, a home to call your own. You are compromising it all."

Predictably, James' eyes drifted away from Severus', uncomfortable with the truth spoken. "I'm not. I've never left Lily-"

"Oh, but you've considered it. Many times." The disgust in Severus' voice was only too apparent. Taking James' chin between his fingers, he squeezed hard and watched the man wince. "I am a man unworthy of such affections. I have murdered, tortured, raped-"

James flinched, the spell momentarily broken. "Stop it."

"I have given myself up to Lucius' entertainment," Severus continued regardless, determined to make James understand. "In each and every way possible, I have sacrificed my soul for the Dark Lord's cause." He paused, allowing this to sink in, experiencing a moment pity on his own behalf as he cut apart any chances he still had with this man.

"Is this what you wanted to hear, Potter? Will this supply you with the ability to continue the fairy tale without my presence in the back of your mind?"

James closed his eyes and exhaled shakily, conflicting emotions fighting for dominance.

Could he forgive Severus for what he'd done, and when he'd not even been given a promise to change?

Severus leant back in his chair, dark hair falling across his face. "Do not pursue me."

James drew back with a shiver. "I wouldn't... This isn't what this is about..."

"Occlumency Potter! Then stop thinking it! Your mind is like a beacon. Cease calling me to you, and I may allow my mind to rest. There is only so long I can go on resisting-

James' head snapped up, but Severus had already clamped his lips together. He did not mean to lead the man on, or imply anything. He merely wished for this to end.

But Severus' own self loathing somehow made it easier for James to see all there was to love in the man.

James shook his head absently in denial of Severus' ugliness. To him, Severus was perfection. His hands, which now shook, held all of the delicacy they had years ago, when he'd handled endless potions in his secret dungeon rooms. His skin was just as pale. White even. The scars, fresh and old, only manipulated the beauty into something more powerful in James' eyes.

His dark hair, curling around his face, seemed to hold the instinct to hide the man from the world. Perhaps wisely. His wit. His sharp tongue. His intensity. His darkness. His braveness. His intelligence. Those eyes. His firm, lean frame... It was a dangerous, intoxicating mix that James could not remain immune to.

The love James felt for Severus was heavy. It was burdensome and unhealthy without space to breath. It was all consuming. It was not, as he might have liked, warm and careless, like he felt for Lily. It was not pure and it wasn't right.

"I am unworthy," Severus said, willing James to truly understand. "We can never be together. It is not going to happen."

James nodded in understanding, even as his eyes drifted towards Severus' lips. He swallowed heavily. It was the truth, and he was only just beginning to fully realise it. "I know."

"You loathe what I have become," Severus insisted. "As you should."

James could not deny that he did, yet he lifted his elbows onto the table as he leaned forwards, confusion washing over him in waves.

Unconsciously, Severus tongue fidgeted in his mouth, darting out to moisten the focus of James' attention. "Please... Do not do this." He wouldn't beg.

A hand Severus hadn't even been aware of approaching, settled on his shoulder, a second set of fingers curling into the greasy hairs at the back of his neck as James reached further across the table, transfixed.

"I do not want this," Severus informed him harshly, even as he allowed James to pull him slowly forward. Severus could feel the rapid exhalation of James' breath against his face, see every

imperfection in his skin... count the lines across his forehead.

Severus' lips parted, his head shaking wordlessly as his hands gripped the arms of the chair so hard his knuckles turned white.

And then James was kissing him like there was no tomorrow. With a brief jolt of shock, Severus' eyes closed of their own accord and he could only thank Merlin that he hadn't forgotten how to do this.

The man was close. Far too close. Yet Severus could only weave his hands into the man's flimsy, too-tight t-shirt and force him as near as the table allowed.

All of his carefully crafted excuses crumbled under the softness of the other man's lips, the smell of him, the unique taste of him.

One of them, though neither could discern which, gave a desperate whimper as their tongues became re-acquainted. It was the same as they remembered, yet very different, mingled with an inevitable awkwardness which prevented either of them from lowering their guard. It was a battle of wills, and both men found themselves lost in the sensation.

A chair scraped across the floor, and before Severus could protest, James had found his way over onto his lap, without once breaking their kiss. The man was a heavy weight against his thighs, his mouth restless and constantly moving across his own with an intimacy Severus had somehow managed to forget over the years.

His hands automatically came up to hold the man's waist, a brief hiss disrupting their kiss as James pushed their groins together. He wanted to tell James to slow down, to back off entirely, but heat was already flooding Severus' veins, and he couldn't, for the life of him, will it to stop.

Lucius may have drawn forced pleasure from Severus' body, but never once had the man expressed a desire to kiss him. Why would he? What Severus was experiencing now had the ability to cast his mind into a fog, to repress the threat of repercussions and dangerous consequences. He was suspended in limbo with no desire to resurface.

But facing the consequences was inevitable, and Severus drew back with reluctance, wiping his wet mouth on the back of his hand.

"Listen to me," he instructed James, having difficulty keeping his voice steady. "You want security. Safety. Peace of mind. I can offer you none of these things."

"Don't need it," James mumbled absently against his skin, as he trailed an unsteady pattern down Severus' jaw. Severus bit back a moan as a tongue dipped out to lick the length of his throat. "Need you."

"No." Severus pulled back, unable to resist the urge to cup James' warm face in his hands to prevent him from drawing away too far. The man was flushed and breathing deeply, his lips swollen. Severus swallowed heavily and forced himself to look away.

"You don't want this," he explained, as though speaking to a child. "You will despise me even more if I allow you to continue-"

James shifted restlessly, and latched once more onto Severus' neck with a dismissive grunt as the man attempted to convince him to stop.

With a deep sigh, Severus leant his head against the back of the chair as James feasted on all the

flesh available to him. It didn't take the man long to reach the buttons of his cloak, and Severus snapped out of his arousing daze.

"What is this going to achieve? You foolish man," he asked, almost affectionately, smoothing his fingers over the soft mess of James' hair, before yanking it upwards with a sharp tug.

James twisted out of Severus' grip with a gasp of pain, eyes glazed over. There was an undercurrent of repulsion in his features that made Severus' skin crawl. No. This wasn't right.

"Let me do this," James insisted impatiently. "I don't care if you still hate me. Take it for meaningless sex. Sleep with me."

Severus stiffened, drawing back as though stung, a tremor passing through his body as his senses became consumed with the thought. He tried frantically to remind himself that this man had a wife. A child in the same room. A life he had no place in.

"Do this, and we never have to see each other again," James continued, wrapping his fingers round Severus' wrist and forcing his gaze upwards. "Just the once. Maybe that's all I need."

Severus met James' eyes hesitantly and his heart sank. This wasn't James giving into the desire to rekindle any kind of romance between them, but foolishly convincing himself that a one night stand was what he needed.

Severus wanted to laugh out loud, and would have done were he not so angered by the assumption.

"You believe our feelings that trivial? That a simple shag will suffice-"

"Our?" James repeated, eyes wide. "Our feelings. Is that what you said?"

"Get off me," Severus demanded, pressing hard against the small of James' back, but the man wouldn't budge.

"Was it?" The hope in James' eyes was something that only further deepened Severus' growing shame. He couldn't allow him to think there was any hope of a second chance between them. It would only end in regret. It was a dangerous concept even to consider.

"Why is it so hard to admit?" James continued adamantly.

Sighing deeply, Severus allowed his grip to relax and turned his face away, lips sealed.

Inevitable awkwardness overcame James and he climbed off of Severus' lap with a snort. He did not go as far as Severus had hoped however, and settled for perching on the table in front of him, legs spread on either one of the arm rests, so that Severus had a clear view of the bulge in his trousers.

"Ok, let me just ask you this..." James began finally, as the silence stretched into agonizing minutes. He rubbed a hand over his face, meeting Severus' raised eyebrow with all the confidence he could muster. "If I... offered myself to you..." He spread his hands wide, choosing his words carefully. "...All of me. If I proposed that we-"

"I have no hope of a reconciliation between us, Potter," Severus interrupted sharply, before the man could say something he'd regret. "You must understand that. Do not think I have been pining for you all of these years."

James gave a small shrug, eyes fixed on Severus' face. "But you do still... feel for me? At all?"

Severus sat silently. His dark eyes traveled lazily over the messy hair, the thin face, the broad shoulders, and finally settling on the man's crotch, where the evidence of his arousal was still very much evident. He knew it would be useless to deny something so obvious.

James allowed a small smile, as Severus' expression changed without permission, softening, deepening in answer. "I thought so," he said quietly, the constriction in his chest easing slightly. "And hoped."

"This can't happen." Severus shifted backwards uncomfortably as James' legs slid closed, and he dropped gently down from the table.

Instead of further argument, James merely sighed and crossed the kitchen to Harry's crib. His son was sleeping soundlessly. Was he a complete arsehole for jeopardising his family this way? Did he really need Severus or had his addiction to the man simply grown out of proportion. Would the real deal match up to his fantasies, or was he living in the past, set to be sorely disappointed?

James sensed when Severus came to stand behind him, tentatively peering down into the crib for the first time. He watched with a small smile as Severus' eyes widened, and then gradually softened as he took in the tiny babies' features.

"Hm," Severus uttered quietly, an odd mix of emotions consuming him as he regarded the child. He tensed as James exhaled deeply beside him.

This boy was the evidence of his inability to forgive. It was proof that James was capable of loving another, aside from him. That Lily could offer him opportunities impossible to Severus. There was life beyond each other.

"He looks like you," Severus murmured, unable to help himself from voicing the obvious comparison. "A perfect copy."

"He's got Lily's eyes," James responded, just as softly. He brushed a stray eye lash from the boy's face. "Emerald green."

"Quite a colour," Severus noted blandly.

James turned to Severus and raised a hand, and to Severus' surprise, traced the line of the other man's brow. Rough fingers worked their way under a bagged eye, while James stared into the dark pupils. Severus accepted the unspoken message with a grim sigh. His face tilted away from Harry, shuddering subtly as a ripple of jealousy curled its way down his spine.

This time, when James pulled his head down and mouthed 'please,' Severus gave in with little persuasion. If this was what James needed to be rid of him, who was he to deny the man this golden opportunity? He would not allow himself to hope it would be something more, or that James wouldn't wake up screaming that he'd touched something so filthy.

Clenching his fist in the soft strands of James' hair, Severus breathed in the man's scent and gave himself up to sensation. God, he'd missed this. With the man so close, so desperate and as undeniably attractive as he remembered him to be, Severus' inner voice weakened and instincts took over.

He'd denied himself physical affection for so long, any human contact would have been heaven. The fact that it was James kicking off his shoes and pulling off his clothes with reckless abandon, only made the experience that much more intense.

Three years of pent up passion would finally find its release. Severus dropped to the floor

obligingly, an absent smirk on his face as James pushed his legs apart and settled between them.

The kitchen tiles were hard on Severus' back, but James' face was more than enough of a distraction, strained with determination.

James rasped an impatient lubrication spell and hesitated, his hand shaking as it held his cock against the sticky wetness.

Physically, Severus felt no where near ready to be penetrated and he allowed himself a moment of panic as he realised just how quick this was going to be.

They'd lost their chance of a sensuous first-time three years ago. Neither had time to contemplate an ideal scenario.

Severus wondered at just how bitter things had become between them. He shot James a daring glance and without much grace, clasped the man's backside in his palms and forced him forwards. James slipped completely inside in one fluid movement.

Severus grunted in pain and watched as James' eyes squeezed shut with a long hiss, his head rolling back slightly and his mouth gaping in pleasure.

Relenting to the submissive, Severus lifted his hips slightly and felt a disarming spark of excitement, intense pleasure and calm all at once. He was a fool to think he could forget James Potter. The man was just a much a part of him as his own blood.

James grabbed for Severus' shoulders, his fingers leaving indents in the pale flesh as he pulled out of Severus completely, before his hips jerked uncontrollably and he was encased once again in almost unbearable tightness.

The rhythm that followed was far from steady. Severus was silent, more fascinated with watching the unrestrained emotion across James' face, than by the soreness he felt.

He could have counted the seconds before James' hands tightened at his waist, his whole body tensing as he came.

James was breathing deeply as he regained control of his senses. He sat back on his heels and shook his head at Severus with hooded eyes.

"Again," he said, almost immediately, managing a small smirk as he lowered his face to Severus'.

Expecting further brutality, Severus frowned in surprise as James' lifted himself much more carefully above him, his lips soft and warm as they pressed against his own.

His hardness pressed into James' belly and he felt the other man smile against him. He drew back and raised an eyebrow, unmistakable determination on his face as he moved to kiss Severus' chest and stomach.

"Over me yet, Potter?" Severus asked, his breath catching as James' teeth scraped against the inside of his thigh.

James snorted, not hesitating in his wet trail down Severus' torso, rediscovering his body, scar to scar.

## Chapter 20

Severus woke abruptly, the muscles in his back twinging violently in protest against a night spent sprawled across Potter's granite kitchen floor. He stifled a cough, his throat sore; the consensual abuse of the moist cavern almost became a regret as he attempted a hesitant swallow, and fought the urge to gag in response to the stale, bitter taste that lingered in each corner.

A dull ache in his groin and a sharp, constant pain in his backside also provided a firm reminder of the previous night's activities. But oh, it had been worth every second. A satisfied smirk crept its way onto thin lips as the memories resurfaced. Severus had never welcomed pain before, but this discomfort he would gladly endure, most perversely, for the benefits they had awarded.

He straightened his spine from where he'd been curled rather tightly around the figure next to him, a deep groan falling from his lips. His chest felt bruised, his hips in a similar condition where the pressure of fingertips was clearly visible.

Cramp spread rapidly across the back of his legs. With an unimpressed grunt, Severus attempted to lift himself, only to find the muscles much heavier than anticipated. The evidence became apparent as he peered down, with bleary eyes, at a pair of long, barely haired legs entwined closely with his own.

Severus soon discovered that it was not just James' legs that were pinning him to the floor. Lightly tanned arms, settled quite comfortably around his midriff and upper torso, were providing a dead weight against his chest.

Severus drew back warily, switching into a higher degree of wakefulness as he became very aware of his complete nakedness.

Slightly disturbed, James grunted restlessly, pressing his face intimately into Severus' neck. Swallowing, Severus fought to remain unaffected as the gentle exhalation of James' breath, where it tickled his pulse point, sent a pleasant shudder through his body.

The subtle rummage of sheets and an infant gurgle carried across the room as the first streaks of sun breached the curtains. Realising that it was most probably the child's restless state that had woken him, Severus threw a guilty glance at Harry's crib.

He considered disentangling himself and checking on the other man's child, but the notion was far too unnerving, and James' warmth far too comfortable against his side.

Instead, he closed his eyes and absently stroked the back of James' palm, where it cradled his upper thigh.

He had no idea what time he'd finally dropped off, but realised he had been clearly mistaken for assuming Potter only wished for a quick fumble. No, when the Gryffindor had eased his way into his body for the third time, altering their positions deliberately to ensure he hit Severus' prostate on every other thrust, and greedily mapping out the thin body beneath him with calloused hands, Severus could finally believe, that for whatever inane reason, James still found him attractive. He really had needed this just as much as he let on.

For reasons Severus couldn't quite understand, the idea of having his naked, bony, scarred body bared beneath him, spread open and willing, had been all the motivation James' libido had needed to sustain him throughout the night. To feel so desired was a feeling Severus had long forgotten,

and it had been sorely missed.

Coincidentally, the man currently sleeping so peacefully in his arms was the only one to ever look twice at his battered form. The only one who could peel back his layers without wincing.

Not that Severus had difficulty keeping up with James' stamina. After such an enthusiastic performance, he could hardly conceal the fact that he'd wanted it just as much. With his cock sticky, and flat against his belly, his entire body taut with pleasure from James' ministrations, Severus could hardly object.

Not when James insisted on holding eye contact and releasing a string of barely incoherent sentences, with Severus name choked unmistakably when the pleasure was particularly intense, each forbidden declaration enough to curl Severus' toes.

Severus had not needed to explain that he was less than experienced in this type of sexual experience, allowing his partner to take the lead and responding in any way he found appropriate. It still cast him into confusion each time James did not recoil from his touch, but welcomed their skin contact as though he were accepting a gift only Severus could give.

Pushed back into old insecurities, it wasn't until James showed a moments weakness, somewhere during his rather drawn out, shuddering second orgasm, his hands shaking as he fought to bring Severus to the same end, that the Slytherin had found a way to regain a measure of control, and the dominance he'd become used to.

James had blinked, then smirked weakly as Severus flipped them over rather forcefully, batting away his pumping hand to instead plunder the man's mouth with his tongue, and grind himself against a firm thigh until he was just as much a shaking wreck as James was.

Never had he given himself to someone so completely, with a trust and instant willingness. After years of guarding himself, rebuilding walls and emotional defences, Severus had uncurled surprisingly easily under the depth of James' desire.

During his service to the Dark Lord, Severus had been bent over many times, been shoved against a wall, forced to accept new members into their group by brutally stripping them of the last of their innocence. But never had he experienced more than the odd, infrequent spark of arousal that took a mere moment to die. When Lucius had realised just the level of stimulation it took for Severus to actually get off, the game became less appealing, until it was only he that really gained from their 'private meetings,' twisting them into a selfish occurrence Severus had come to dread.

So when James manipulated his body with such ease, drawing out sensations that could not even begin to be described, Severus could almost imagine he was a virgin again.

Severus closed his eyes and pinched the back of his hand, hard, in order to force himself into the present before yet another orgasm could be drawn from his exhausted body, from the mere memory alone. He would not allow the smug smirk threatening to widen any further. He would not smile for the first time in three years, and allow it to split his face with the force of its gratitude.

The blackened windows gradually lightened around them, as Severus fought the urge to drift off back into slumber, one hand dipping lower to trace absent circles on the small of James' bare back.

If only life were as kind as to grant him this blessing on a regular basis, and he could wake up every morning feeling this ridiculously sated.

Severus froze as the figure on top of him finally begun to stir, the pressure on various parts of his

body easing and increasing simultaneously as James stretched lazily around him.

Before he could feign sleep, a groggy face was staring into his own, blinking away the last traces of sleep. The hands on Severus' chest tightened briefly as James shifted into a sitting position, a pair of legs untangling from his own and leaving Severus cold.

Their faces were very close together and it was all Severus could do not to just remove that little distance between them, and kiss away the slow building panic in the brown eyes connecting with his own.

He jerked forward, lips parted in a silent greeting, but it was too late. James had rolled off of him with a discreet cough, his face pale and strained.

"Severus," he stated unnecessarily, nodding in a way that was painfully formal. "You should have woken me."

A brief flash of disappointment crossed Severus' face at the hasty retreat, but he too sat up, uncomfortable with remaining in such a vulnerable position. He made no response, watching James warily as he groped for his boxers.

He dropped his eyes as the unmistakable stain across the man's stomach and thighs disappeared with the touch of a wand. Traces of Severus cast away without hesitation.

A minute later, James had staggered towards the other end of the kitchen, pulling a t-shirt over his head and running a hand through his messed hair. He paused as he approached the fridge, seeming to collect himself before he reached up to one of the highest cupboards alongside it.

Severus watched from his position on the floor as James pulled down a jar of a clear white substance, twirling it round absently before he passed it across.

"For your..." he explained awkwardly, gesturing vaguely between Severus' legs. "I've used it before. Takes away the sting."

Severus' eyes flickered to the half- empty bottle. It mocked him in its near emptiness, proof that he was not the only man to have been spread across this floor for James' pleasure.

"No," Severus declined, as politely as he was able.

James' shuttered face, apprehension leaking through despite his visible effort to distance himself, flickered in surprise. "Fine," he shrugged finally, placing it on the table. "If you change your mind, use as much as you want."

Severus faltered on verbal gratitude, but nodded shortly in understanding. Did James not realise the fragility of his current state?

Severus would not admit he was slipping so carelessly back into the role of an inferior, allowing James the same power he'd held over him in school, keen for the man's approval. He had made never made love before. Never attempted to convey as much passion, or wanted to please someone so much. Often, he had admired the way James had matured over the years, both physically and mentally, though it still stung to know the man could be so thoughtless.

He cleared his throat. "A... A blanket?"

"Of course," James answered immediately, though his eyes were anywhere but downcast. He conjured Severus' request and handed it over so the man could cover himself.

"Thank you." Severus folded the material generously over his knees, both embarrassed and frustrated that James had made it so he felt the need to do so.

James lingered for a moment longer in obvious discomfort, and then, wordlessly, he paced across the room once more and eased Harry from his crib.

Folding his arms tightly across his chest, Severus cautiously prepared to speak, but James had already left the room, silently nudging the door closed behind him.

Severus blinked, a deep chill encompassing him. Served of his purpose, he felt used; a feeling he was entirely used to, though never in these circumstances. Had he imagined James' devotion the previous night? Had it only been he that had experienced such a connection? For if they were not soul mates, they were the next best thing. It made no difference if a reconciliation was impossible, and he'd never dare propose to accept such an apology, because the simple fact was unmistakable.

It was as though a bucket of ice had been thrown over the previous sated nature of Severus mood. All in an instant, he felt unnervingly cold. He cursed himself for hoping, all too irrationally, that he would be greeted more warmly from the man who'd treated him with such thorough affection just hours before.

Severus rubbed a hand across his jaw and frowned tiredly. He would not debate it. As James said, this was a one night affair and it would remain that way; uncomplicated and eliminated thereafter.

Just as he had finally gathered the willpower to crawl out from under the table they'd somehow ended up under, hissing against the aches of his body, James returned. Now fully dressed, he placed Harry back in his crib, supposedly changed, and with a brief glance at Severus, flicked on the kettle.

"The boy shall be scarred for life," Severus remarked briefly, reverting to familiar scorn to conceal his discomfort and sudden awkwardness. "You were making quite some noise last night, Potter."

James winced, but made no attempt to reply. He appeared cautious, and almost vacant in expression. Severus had the impression the man was considering something foolish, whether that be in his favour or otherwise.

Whatever it was, something about the previous night had unnerved the man deeply. The idea was enough to force Severus into speaking his mind, taking the lead while James was incapable.

"A one night arrangement," he clarified clearly, unable to contend with the stale air any longer, watching the other man with concealed concern. "Perhaps now we can both live in peace."

James' eyes flickered, and he met Severus' gaze properly for the first time. When he spoke, it was rough and bitter. "Peace? Is that what you call it?"

"It is all you have the right to ask for," Severus retorted impatiently, but James merely snorted and busied himself with clearing the table.

Severus gave a resigned sigh as watched the man work, consciously distracting himself, before starting a slow search for his shoes. "This was your call, Potter," he muttered, running a hand through a greasy knot. "I was the opposition party. Your gratitude is admiring."

Very glad that Severus had dressed, at least partially, while he'd been granted the privacy to do so, James set about heating the dinner they had neglected to eat. His lips tightened, but he did not answer. He had to remain detached, passive... dispassionate. It was the only way he'd ever let Severus go.

"Are you hungry?" he asked absently over his shoulder, as he searched for clean plates.

Severus straightened up and eyed James' half-clothed form. "Not for food," he murmured, slightly more hoarsely than he'd intended, unable to force the image of James' sweat soaked form from his mind. He could still smell the man on his skin. Taste him. Hell, he could even feel the man's palms on his chest, on his back, between his legs. He was marked each place James had touched him.

He saw James' shoulders tense in response to his remark, and took pity on the man. "I am more inclined towards a coffee, Potter," he corrected himself. "That is all."

James turned around with a frown. Almost of their own accord, his eyes followed the path of Severus' open shirt, and his trousers, slung low on his hips were he'd yet to fasten them. James' eyes paused just above the man's groin, his chest clenching painfully.

"Of course," he nodded. "Milk?"

"No."

Severus caught his gaze for a mere moment, registering only hesitation and what he assumed was regret, before turning away with a look of disgust. "I told you this would happen."

"What?" James asked tersely, back turned. "We would have breakfast?"

"No. Shame," Severus spat, angry, though he had no right to be. He'd expected as much. He knew how much last night had meant to James, yet still the man continued to toy with him, and himself. Why could he not just accept it for what it was, and allow himself to move on without complicating the matter? If the man had made some sort of fuss about it, fought for him, his position would have been clear, but this cold dismissal was totally unhinging.

"I'm not ashamed," James answered irritably. "Just..." He ran a hand through his hair agitatedly "I... Last night was... It was not exactly what I'd hoped for."

Severs' lips tightened, an eyebrow raising of its own accord. He forced his face not to flush with rising humiliation by pure willpower alone. "Was I an... inadequate lover? If I did not satisfy you-"

"No, you did," James assured him, face breaking into a small, private smile before becoming weighted with sincerity once more. "Merlin, did you. And that's the problem. I allowed myself to get carried away."

He looked at Severus hard for a moment, before leaning back against the worktop and crossing his arms, face shuttered. "Look, Severus, all I'm trying to do here is get you out of my system, but the more I try, the deeper you're ingrained. I... I'm not going to lie, I think I've made it pretty obvious that you still mean a lot to me. Despite everything. I was a fool to think... especially after last night... that I could.... that it would ever be possible to rid myself of you. Waking up like that... with you right there." He swallowed, eyes taking on a hopeless expression before dropping to the floor. "I must be the most craziest man on the planet, but the only time I ever feel alive is when you're in the room with me."

Severus' face twitched, contorting into a curious frown as he watched James' face finally reveal some honest emotion.

"And that's no good to me. I'm a married man. I respect Lily. I love her. She and Harry are all I have. Working for the Order is my life. Capturing people like you, sending them to Azkaban, is what I do every day. It's my life, Severus." James took a deep breath and a large gulp of coffee. He pushed an identical cup towards Severus and frowned deeply at the man. "And now you're here,

and none of it seems to matter. I just want... It's not logical. Nothing about what I want is fair on anyone."

Severus matched James contemplative expression. He couldn't agree more.

Hesitantly, he took a step forward, following instincts rather than attempting to locate a practical solution to this dilemma which really was without answer.

When James remained stationary, he reached out a bony hand and laid it across the other man's shoulder, drawing him close. Breathing in a deep breath, James rested his head against Severus' collar bone and sagged against him.

"You're not making it easy to fight," James protested half-heartedly. "You could have just walked out. Left again. That was the plan. That's what I've been setting myself up for."

Severus' arms tightened around James' waist, and he indulged the closeness, knowing the other man did as well. They really did need to make a very serious choice.

Eventually, James pulled back and Severus searched his face with a guarded expression. He had given this man the ammunition to hurt him before. And he had received a number of equal blows in return.

Heartache really had aged James prematurely. He was unhealthy, depressed, lonely... It was pitiful, and Severus could stand why the man was sick of it.

"Either I live without you, and spend the rest of my life as a... machine, or I force you to bare the brunt of my emotions, and tell you just how fucking miserable I am."

Severus' clenched his jaw in frustration as he wound a hand in James' soft hair. He did not have the answer. He knew James was looking to him for one, but he would not influence the man either way. It would be his decision.

Instead, he lowered his lips to James' ear. "You know of my sins."

With a soft groan, James confirmed that he did. Pulling back, he searched Severus' eyes for permission before sliding his palm into the man's open shirt, until he had pushed it from his shoulders. The dark mark stood in a dark contrast against the paleness of Severus' skin.

He stiffened, but did not protest as James traced the grotesque image with his finger.

"I could forgive you. Given time," he murmured, unable to conceal all traces of disgust from his features. "And we could... It would be terrible, Sev, but if I could have you, I'd make any fucking sacrifice. I don't ever want to wake up and feel like that again. Knowing I'm going to have to watch you leave. I don't want to feel dirty, or so fucking guilty. I want to be allowed to want you as much as I like." His eyes found Severus', anguished and hopeful.

Shaking his head, Severus tugged back James hand and held it in his own to prevent the man from touching it again. "No," he disagreed quietly.

A spark of anger fled through James. "Are you even sorry for what you've done? Have you even reached the point of regret yet?"

"I doubt, Potter, that you could possibly loathe the Dark Lord more than I," Severus hissed distastefully, effectively provoked. "He has committed crimes you could not even dream of. I have witnessed..."

"No, carry on," James encouraged him, eyes wide with anxiety, but also an unrivaled determination. "This is what I need to hear."

The shutters fell across Severus face and his tone turned cold. "Not today."

James sighed, unsurprised but disappointed despite himself. Turning away from Severus, he focused his eyes on the window where the sun was beginning to light the room more prominently. It was almost midday and Lily had yet to return. Perhaps she had known, after all, the dangers in leaving her husband alone with his x-lover.

Twitching slightly as shame began to set in, James glanced up at Severus and felt a rush of gratitude. Speaking even briefly of such atrocities had been difficult enough for the man, but his bitterness and obvious regret had been what James needed to hear.

Though Severus had changed in more ways than were imaginable, blackened by years of abuse, he carried the same insecurity. He just expressed it differently. His Severus was still very much alive.

With Severus' slow promise to change his loyalties, whether that be joining the Order or otherwise, James reasons for simply not sinking to his knees and begging Severus to return to him, like he had three years ago, was growing thinner.

"Are my scars that much more horrifying by the light of day?" Severus asked plainly, staring intently at James and trying to gauge his reaction.

James swallowed, and then answered with the honesty they both deserved. "Yes."

Severus flinched, but he did not appear surprised. "I am not a frail schoolboy any longer, Potter. I do not need your protection-"

"But you do need saving," James argued, though he kept his voice quiet, convincing himself just as much as Severus. "You're just as... lost as I am."

When Severus failed to deny it, James considered his case won. "We need each other. I know you're right, and we've both changed, but I'd like to get to know you again. All of you."

Severus took a hesitant step backwards, but James' head was finally clearing, and he knew what had to be done, as hard as it would be.

"If you're not going to leave, then come back to me," he said quietly, watching Severus' face closely. "I can't yet promise to leave Lily. She needs me too much. I can't abandon her. But when this war is over-"

"I shall serve a sentence in Azkaban."

"No," James shook his head forcefully, sickened by the thought.

"I deserve it," Severus retorted impatiently. "You know as well as I-"

"Redeem yourself in another way then." James folded his arms over his chest, his heart racing as a new life grew in potential, right before him. "Work for the Order. Become a spy or something. I'll speak with Dumbledore. That way, you can prove you switched sides before it was clear who would win."

"And you presume Dumbledore shall triumph?" Severus sneered. "I have seen the other side, Potter. Been part of it. The competition will not fall lightly."

James shook his head wearily, but seemed to accept it. "With you on our side, we'll be better off. The only reason we're losing so many at the moment is because we're fighting blind. You could warn us of the next raid. Be our inside man. It would be enough to clear your name after the war, and then we could..." James trailed off, hands shaking at his sides.

"And you come as the reward?" Severus asked quietly, lips upturned in mild amusement. "An occupied bed to come home to?"

James flushed. "Don't do it for me. It has to be for you. Because you want a new life. If you are not brave enough-"

"Courage is not an issue, Potter," Severus hissed, angered by the assumption.

"Then what is?" James snapped back, just as impatiently

"Practicality."

James rubbed a hand across his forehead, a headache brewing. "Then I don't know what else I can say. You know what I want. The rest is up to you. You've just told me what you've done... who you've hurt... and I know there's more, but the fact that I'm still here has to be reason enough for you to believe I still want to know you. The bad as well as the good."

Severus' eyes were dark on James' face, searching for any trace of a lie. What the man proposed would certainly not run smoothly. There would be danger. People would get hurt. People they both cared about.

James seemed to sense Severus' thoughts, for he stepped forwards and laid a palm across the man's arm. "I'm already hurting Lily. I can't love her like she wants me to, because you still have my heart. At the rate we're going, we won't last anyway. I'll divorce her. I'll move out. I will be free to see whoever I want-"

"I saw you," Severus interrupted gruffly, shaking off James hand. "As I arrived, you were... On the sofa-"

"Yeah, that was..." James ran a hand through his hair awkwardly as he recalled the moment, "it would have been the first time we'd had sex in months, Severus, I promise you. And it would not have been anything like last night. It... wouldn't have meant the same. Nothing ever has."

"You have betrayed her in the past?" Severus asked, eyes narrowed, refusing to soften under James' sentimentality.

James shifted restlessly. "Why are we discussing this? It's not the point-"

"It is exactly the point, Potter. I would not be so tolerant. If you cannot even remain faithful to your wife, whom you pledged lifelong devotion to, you shall stray from me-"

"No," James argued. "It wouldn't be like that. Things would be different. I would be happy. A... whole man. I would have no reason to sleep around if I was with you. I'd be more than just faithful. I-"

"Like you were in our previous relationship? What was her name?... Amy?"

James winced harshly. "That was different."

Severus snorted. As much as James' offer tempted him, he could not help raising these points.

Perhaps it was because he knew he'd already made up his mind.

"You haven't even told me what you want," James said finally, sitting down at the table in a hope their discussion would stop feeling like such a confrontation. "Here's me, spilling my fucking heart out, and you haven't said a word about how you feel."

"This is... I... Potter, there is no..." Severus stuttered ineffectively, reminding James forcefully of the incomprehensible boy he'd once been when his confidence failed him. "I- I do not do emotional attachments anymore. I have no desire to make a commitment. Least of all to you."

James shook his head, lips upturned in a grim smile. "Then why did you even let me touch you last night? Why did you stay? Why were you so fucking... involved in the whole thing? Why didn't you stop me? Why did you let it happen three times if it wasn't turning you on?"

Trapped, Severus could only defy James with silence, his cheeks flushed a dull red. When the man appeared in front of him, on his knees and eyes darker than he'd ever seen them, he knew the game was up.

"At school, when we were together... things were good, weren't they? Tell me you at least accept that. We just... work together, Severus. You and I. You're the other half of me."

"Do not recall those moments," Severus defied him comfort of the shared memory. "That is the past."

James scowled, rubbing a hand across his jaw in frustration. "I know it is. But it can also be the future if we let it. Why won't you allow yourself to remember?"

"Because our time is one of the few favourable memories I hold, and I won't allow you to destroy it," Severus whispered harshly. He exhaled deeply and added more quietly, "I am well aware that what we had was... real. Do not think I remain under any illusion that you did not... that you didn't..."

"That I didn't love you," James interjected with a sigh, causing Severus to wince.

"Yes," he confirmed softly.

"Severus, nothing has changed—"

"It has," Severus argued wearily. "Beyond comprehension."

"Let me help you," James pleaded, tentatively taking Severus' hands in his own, and drawing courage when he was not pushed back. "Don't destroy yourself just to prove a point. Forget about me then. Do whatever you need to. Just promise me you'll speak with Dumbledore. It's not too late, Severus. You're a good man, I know you are. And after this shitting war is over, I'll find you. Whatever happens, you'll be my friend again. We'll work something out. Just... tell me when you're ready. Don't leave me again. Not like that."

Almost unconsciously, Severus found himself nodding, caught up in James' fantasy as the last of his objections were gradually eliminated, one by one. His back sagged against the chair and he exhaled shakily.

Perhaps the man was right. It was time to start facing up to his crimes, and relocating himself back into civil society. Heaven knows he was done with the torture, the pain, the guilt. He needed James. The man's punishment for his childish bet making had been served. Neither of them were boys anymore. They were men and it was time to move on.

The plan held endless flaws, but if it meant he could finally regain the life he had lost three years ago, and obtain the man of his dreams, he was willing to be a better man. For the first time in a long while, Severus' life held promise.

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## Chapter 21

Severus blinked away the rain that obscured his vision, tasting blood on his tongue.

His wand arm was strangely heavy as he unlocked his front door. He could not feel his fingers.

Potion bottles crashed to the floor as Severus systematically destroyed his kitchen in search of something... anything that would ease his pain... and restore him to health.

It was blinding and getting increasingly worse. He could not tell if minutes or hours passed but his mind was losing its grip on sanity. He swept his arms through empty cupboards as though they were still full, determined that his saviour was just within his reach.

With a deep grunt, Severus relented and sunk to his knees, his final energy failing him.

...

Severus would not have been adverse to soft plump pillows and a warm blanket had their existence not been such a shock. His back was not used to such mellow luxuries.

"Do not struggle Severus."

A long fingered hand prodded at Severus' forehead, waking the man fully with a start.

"What do you want?" he rasped.

"A conversation, if you are willing," came the same response, non-perturbed by the other man's bluntness.

Severus stilled instantly, recognition dawning on his pale face. He slumped back against his pillows with a wry, unamused snort.

"Albus."

The old man's face loomed close to his own. He was not smiling.

"Severus," Dumbledore responded. "It's been a while hasn't it? You've been a busy boy."

...

"Still no more sign of him then?" Lily asked quietly.

James was at the living room window, as he often was, completely in a world of his own. Rain pelted the glass so aggressively that he could barely make out the garden path, but it did nothing to deter him.

"Sign of who?" James asked innocently. He turned abruptly away from his position and followed Lily into the kitchen.

"You don't have to lie to me anymore, James," Lily assured him. "But it's been more than a month... I think if he was coming back, he would have done it by-"

"I don't know what you're talking about," James snapped, irritated that she'd learnt to read him so well and embarrassed by his own weakness. "Have you fed Harry yet?"

"James-"

"Have you?"

Lily sighed. With a well-practiced look of disapproval, she left the room for a moment and returned with their son cradled delicately in her arms. James' face relaxed into a smile.

He took Harry from her and held him close to his chest. "Hey little man," he spoke softly. "You hungry?"

Lily watched her husband interact with their child with uncharacteristic jealousy. James never smiled at her that way... never held her... barely looked at her. Nothing had changed in the last month since Severus' visit. If anything, it had got worse.

She took a seat opposite and watched them with weary acceptance.

"When are we going to discuss it then?" she asked quietly.

"Discuss what?" James looked up.

"Divorce," Lily answered simply.

James blinked, a frown dislodging his former peaceful expression. The longer she stared at him, eyebrows raised and unrelenting, the more serious he knew she was.

With a sigh, James pulled Harry tighter against him and pressed a kiss to his forehead. He didn't respond with flippancy or false confusion like she'd expected. He merely sat in silence, patiently feeding his son until he burped and James smiled.

He turned back to Lily with a weary expression. "A year of marriage... Is that all we've achieved?"

"It never should have happened in the first place," Lily replied, not unkindly. "We both know that. I shouldn't have let myself talk you into it. I knew you were mourning him, James... I always knew it. I just thought that... after time you'd... forget. That you'd move on. That I could make you happy..."

"I've tried Lily-"

"No," Lily snorted, getting to her feet and taking Harry from him. "No you didn't. You need to fall out of love before you can start to forget."

...

"Why have you brought me here?" Severus snapped ungracefully. He eyed his surroundings with suspicion, disconcerted by the lack of hostility with which he was being treated.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "You mean aside from saving your life? They left you in quite a state this time-"

"Why have you brought me here," Severus repeated impatiently. "Where am I?"

"You are in the Order headquarters. I have been trying to get a hold of you, Severus, for quite some time."

Severus winced as he attempted to sit up. His whole body felt heavy. He knew this was a good sign, he was under the influence of magic and his wounds would be healed.

"And I you."

Dumbledore frowned in surprise, staring carefully at his former pupil. When he realised that he was telling the truth, he smiled and sat down.

"Then this conversation has been long- awaited on both sides," he said. "You know what it is I am to ask of you?"

Severus swallowed, his face paling even more if possible. "I do," he answered slowly. "You are not as elusive as you may think old man."

"Perhaps not," Dumbledore studied him carefully. "If i'd have known all it would take to bring you to the other side was a night with James Potter... We may have had been having this conversation years ago..."

Severus scowled. "The boy... Their son. You must protect-"

"Relax dear boy, relax. Start from the beginning. You must tell me everything."

...

James frowned across the court room at his wife... or ex wife as he should now refer to her. It had taken another month of late night discussions and stilted rows, but Lily had given up. She'd given up on him... on them. And he couldn't say he blamed her.

He felt almost relief if it wasn't for the guilt, as he signed the papers to consolidate their separation.

She was waiting for him as he shook his lawyers hand and left the building.

"James," she approached him.

He smiled at her and drew her into his arms before she could protest. "God Lily... I'm sorry," he muttered into her hair. "I really screwed this one up didn't I?"

"Takes two," she replied kindly, matching his tentative smile. "I could've been a better-"

"No," James cut her off sharply, frowning hard at her. "This wasn't your fault Lily... This was all me." He sighed heavily and ran a hand through his unruly hair. "Those last few years at school... after Se...after he left, you and Lupin were all I had. Literally. I'll never forget that. You've been one of the best friends I could ever ask for. I love you Lily, I really do, I just..."

"I know," she smiled sadly. "I understand, James. We're both better off this way. Harry is better off this way. Just promise me... you'll sort it out? You'll talk to someone... You need to get over it. I hate seeing you like this..."

James nodded sincerely and pulled her back to him for a final hug. "Thank you for everything, Lily Evans. I pray to Merlin you find a man that can treat you better than I did. Shouldn't be hard."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and walked away, a swirl of emotions pooling in his stomach. He'd lost his wife today. She'd lost the husband she'd always dreamed off. He would no longer live under the same roof as his son. He would no longer have someone to sleep next to at night. He would not have a home to come back to.. a family..

Whatever happened in his future, James knew he'd made the right decision. He was emotionally scarred. He never would have thought a few whirlwind months at school could change his life so

dramatically. He was a fool to think he would love again. A fool to think he wasn't broken. But a broken single man couldn't hurt anybody.

James ducked into an alleyway and pulled out his wand. Sighing heavily, he closed his eyes and apparated to the headquarters of the Order, keen to distract himself from anything personal and dive headfirst into death eater hunting once again. He needed to put the past behind him, once and for all.

...

Dumbledore answered the door himself when James appeared outside. He could tell by his expression straightaway that something had changed in the man.

"It is done then," Dumbledore stated calmly. "Lily and Harry are-"

"Safe," James nodded, not meeting his eyes. "She'll find someone else. Someone...whole. She can be happy now."

"And you?" Dumbledore closed the door softly behind him and led the way upstairs. "What future awaits you, young man?"

James shrugged. "I work for the Order. A single life will suit me just fine."

"Just as well then," Dumbledore replied knowingly. "You're just in time for a last-minute gathering."

James' eyes widened and his heart stopped as inch by inch, the long conference table came into view, full of familiar faces and one new one.

A man sat in a black clad cloak, smirking subtly directly opposite him was the last thing James expected to see.

James swallowed, throat dry. "Severus?"

"Meet our newest member," Dumbledore said softly, nudging him inside. "Sit down, James. We have much to discuss."

## Chapter 22

James had never paid so much attention at an Order meeting before. It had been a long time since they'd been offered any sort of hope measurable to the idea of having a spy within Voldemort's very inner circle. It was exactly the insight they needed.

James almost felt sorry for Severus with the extent to which he was being interrogated. His presence wasn't being taken lightly. The fact that Dumbledore was willing to vouch for him was the only thing keeping the man alive in a room full of aurors and resistance fighters.

Severus was scared, James could tell, though he was hiding it well. His hands were gripping the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. His face however, was a mask of complete indifference.

The last time he'd seen Severus was more than 2 months ago and they'd been... James swallowed, a hot flush creeping up his neck. He shifted in his seat and finally Severus caught his eye.

He snorted softly, raising an eyebrow across the table with amusement, as though he knew exactly what was on James' mind. He held his gaze for only a moment before returning his attention to the headmaster.

James did not have the same discipline. He could not force his eyes away from Severus' face, drawn in by the sense of calm and relief that seeped into his bones each time Severus was in the room with him.

"Acting in this manner with be exceedingly dangerous, Severus," Dumbledore informed him gravely. "He is not easily fooled. You know better than all of us the fate which awaits you should Lord Voldemort suspect that you have abandoned his cause. Alas, with any luck, you need not sustain the role for long... If you are correct, then it will not be long before we face him out in the open."

Severus inclined his head, a grim sneer acknowledging the older man's words.

"The Dark Lord has his mind solely on locating the Potter boy," Severus spoke for the first time since the meeting had begun. "He has become, in recent months, obsessed with the child.. Though he does not inform me personally of the entirety of his movements... there are others that he keeps as his advisors."

"Who has the knowledge that we require? Are they reachable?" Dumbledore asked.

Severus winced, a brief shiver setting his jaw into a hard line. A dark look fell across his face as he nodded. "If anybody is to be aware of the plan of attack, it will be Lucius Malfoy."

Whispers and curses traveled along the table in response to the name. Lucius was hated almost as much as Voldemort himself. It would be rare to find a family that not been touched first hand by the evil he was spreading through the wizard and muggle world alike.

"I've heard he's a pervert..." came a voice from James' left. It was a ministry worker, also new to the table. He had a look of pure disgust on his face. "I used to work with him. That man wriggled his slimy arse out of Merlin knows how many sexual harassment offenses... He doesn't just kill people... he enjoys them first. If he's You Know Who's right hand man... that just goes to show what kind of trouble we're in!"

"Is this true Severus?" Dumbledore sighed. "Does Lucius remain callous? Can we expect no mercy from him?"

Severus snorted softly. "Lucius does not tolerate mercy. Nor does he condone fools. If he caught any one of you, you would wish yourselves dead before he turned his wand on you."

"What is his weakness?"

"He is a coward," Severus answered instantly. "He has a lust for power and the money and brains to follow it. He does not care beyond simple acceptance of the Dark Lord's ideology, only the position it brings him. Lucius has far greater concern with what is in his pocket and who is beneath his sheets."

"There was an intern in our office," the man beside James spoke again, his personal dislike of Lucius impossible to contain. "Fresh from Hogwarts. Lucius used to pay him... visits. It wasn't until recently that we realised what he was doing. Boys dead now... but if anyone ever needed to know where Lucius was... what meetings he was in, or what he had for lunch... that boy could've told you."

James watched Severus grit his teeth together. They both knew what that meant. Severus would need to be close to Lucius.

"The Dark Lord allows the remaining Death Eaters to be bent to the will of Lucius..." he said quietly, reluctance slowing his speech so that they all had to strain to hear him. "in certain aspects. It consolidates his power... keeps the chain of command."

"He rapes them?" Dumbledore asked, eyes dark with quiet fury.

"He... would make it so that his victim wanted nothing more than to be violated," Severus answered with distaste. "Some are willing, some are... resistant. It is a game to Lucius. To destroy a man of his dignity... to draw what he wants from them... to turn a strong man into one that would beg... It is a power he is consumed by."

Dumbledore frowned deeply. "Severus, there is a limit to what I can ask of you..."

James was only just beginning to understand where this was going. His blood ran cold and his eyes snapped from their locked position on Severus' face, and he gaped at the headmaster.

The table fell silent, a tense and increasingly awkward air settling among them.

The meeting finished in a blur after that. Severus had barely looked at him throughout the entire ordeal. There was no turning back. He had pledged to help the Order, in any way he could, until his previous offenses had been pardoned. He was theirs now.

It was settled. He was to be their spy. He would retrieve as much information from Lucius as possible.

"I think you may have earnt their respect faster than I could have hoped," Dumbledore spoke loudly, getting to his feet. "You are a brave man, Severus. Welcome back."

Only then did James realise the room had cleared and they were the only three remaining. His mind was numb, filled with defiance and confusion.

"You would have him whore himself for information?" he asked quietly, staring up at Dumbledore with a warning in his eyes.

"I would have him safe and well if i had any other option-" Dumbledore begun, looking very much as though he had been waiting for James to object.

"But it is acceptable?" James could hear his voice rising but did nothing to calm it. "He is a man... not a prostitute for gods sake!"

"It may not come to that, James. I pray that it doesn't. We must trust Severus to do whatever he feels is in his power to help us."

Severus was still not looking at him. His face was paler than normal, his whole body rigid.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and with a quick sympathetic glance at Severus, laid a hand on James's shoulder. An old wrinkled hand that was very quickly shrugged off.

"It is your son he is attempting to protect," he said quietly, suddenly stern. "Do not forget that. Severus must seek redemption in his own way, James. Do not deprive him of a chance to make a positive difference in this world. This is a path to his own salvation as well as everyone else's."

Dumbledore left a stale silence in his wake. The door thudded closed heavily behind him, and Severus and James were the only members of the Order left at Headquarters.

"Look at me," James said finally, when it became obvious Severus had no desire to begin their inevitable confrontation.

Severus complied slowly, and when he did his face was an inscrutable mask. His silence was frustrating James more than any impeding argument.

"You wont touch him," James said finally, in a rush. "You wont lay a hand on him. And he wont touch you. He wont Severus." James alarmed even himself with the hysteria in his voice. All he knew was that the thought of anybody else's hands on Severus in that way made him feel sick to the stomach. The thought that Lucius Malfoy would hurt Severus and use him for his own twisted games, the man he was so painfully in love with, was more than James could stand.

Severus blinked, his exterior was calm but James could see the shadows behind those dark eyes. Severus was scared.

"I cant lose you," James said quietly. "Not again."

Severus closed his eyes briefly and finally stood up, and after a moments pause, walked slowly round to James' side of the table.

"Severus please, I wont let-"

Cold, but soft lips quietened James before he could finish his sentence. Blinking back his surprise, for Severus still had not spoken, James moaned quietly, his toes curling at the intimacy with which Severus was kissing him.

James could smell him now, could feel the quivering of his skin as they made contact. He felt drugged immediately.

It was so unlike any way he'd ever kissed him before, it almost felt foreign, but it wasn't unwelcome. Severus was being unbearably languid. A long fingered hand twisted at the nape of James neck, a thumb on his cheek.

Another small step forward and their bodies were pressed together. When Severus finally pulled

back, James was breathing deeply, his face flushed.

"Severus," James swallowed.

"Severus, Severus, Severus..." Severus repeated quietly, a sigh in his voice. "Are you never quiet?"

He pressed his lips to James' once again, with more urgency than before and James felt his whole body twitch with static. He was reminded once again of how tall Severus had grown, how he had a man's body now... This was not the frail school boy he'd once known.

With a low moan, Severus moved to the corner of James' mouth, to his face, settling at his neck where he paid firm attention to all the skin he could reach. James sighed in approval, relaxing against the distracting ministrations that were making his head spin.

"I have missed you," Severus said in a low voice when he finally pulled back, eyes tracing intent patterns over the other man's face, looking at him properly for the first time that evening.

James grabbed the hand that Severus had raised to touch his face, holding him back. "Missed me? Two months is a long time to ignore somebody..."

Severus frowned. "No, three years is a long time--"

"One year is too long, a month is too long... a day is too fucking long but that's not the point, Severus. You disappeared... again and the next time I see you, you're doing this! What have you really gone and promised Dumbledore you'll do?"

"Whatever I have to," Severus answered, growing impatient. "It was you who demanded I take on this role! It was you who dangled the hope of... a chance... I were to atone--"

"You have to do this for you! Not for me, or us... It has to be because you want to change! You do want to change... don't you?"

Severus glared at him and took a deliberate step backwards. "I do not wish to change, Potter! I wish to..."

"Wish to what?" James prodded him irritably.

"To have a different life. To be a free man. To live how I desire, to believe what I desire... to wake up each morning without fear... to know that those for whom I care are safe... I wish what any sane man wishes for when confronted with the deranged ideology the Dark Lord possesses."

"So you don't believe in all his rubbish?" James asked, relieved to finally hear Severus say it. "Then why did you follow him? If you don't believe muggle-borns should be killed... and you don't want a share in world domination--"

"Because you pushed me to the edge!" Severus seethed. He took an abrupt step back towards James, eyes blazing. "I was a child... scared and alone, with a deep interest in the dark arts. The only person I had ever loved had betrayed me and I did not want to be alone."

"So it is my fault you went to him... All this has happened because of me."

Severus snorted softly. "No, James. This burden is mine and mine alone. I was not of a stable mind at 16... And neither were you. And I am a Slytherin. You seem to enjoy forgetting that. Once you stop putting me on a pedestal and realise, at heart, I am not pure and I am not a saint... you may come to a few realisations."

"I don't care what you are, as long as your mine," James muttered, turning away and pacing the room.

"But in order to respect yourself... accepting me must be something of which you are not ashamed--"

"I am not ashamed--"

"James!" Severus cried in frustration. "If I were to devote myself to you now, our relationship would crumble from the inside. I would detest myself... I would always be the man the Dark Lord has allowed me to become. And you would hate yourself for befriending me."

"No," James frowned defiantly.

"Yes," Severus disagreed. "Which is why we both know I need to do this."

When James continued to scowl, Severus snatched his arm impatiently. "I cannot be with you in this condition," he hissed, forcing James to look at him. "If there is a way to prevent Harry Potter from coming to harm, I shall find it. For his sake, for the worlds sake and for the sake of you and I. You must not stop me."

Severus was looking at him so intently James was forced to drop his eyes. He knew Severus was right. He just didn't like it.

"I hate the thought of you going back there," he said quietly, his voice bitter. "I hated the thought of you there in the first place but this? It makes me feel like tearing this whole room apart, Severus, it really does."

"But you agree I must go?"

James' lips tightened defiantly but he nodded.

"And Lucius?" Severus continued, watching James carefully. "You will allow me to do whatever has to be done."

James knew he could argue no longer. But he would not actively condone that aspect of Severus' burden.

His head was pounding. Why did the world have to be so complicated? He wanted to skip all of the pain and the hurt and just have his happy ending. He didn't want to risk Severus not coming out of this alive.

"I'll kill him," James said finally. And he meant it.

"Not if I kill him first," Severus responded quietly. He tightened the grip he still held on James' arm, twisting the man so that they were face on.

"This is not the first time he will have abused me, James."

James grimaced, but Severus continued anyway, knowing he needed to hear it.

"And I am as much yours now as I was then... Nothing has changed just because we have reconciled. He will have no hold on me other than the physical."

"And that makes it alright?" James snapped, irritated beyond belief by the extent to which this was antagonizing him.

Snape tutted loudly. "Such Jealousy James... I wont remind you that the fact that you go home every night to a wife and do with her as you please. Do you have any idea how I felt when I found out from a newspaper that you were married! That you'd got her pregnant. Do you think I did not have sleepless nights-"

"No ones told you?" James asked suddenly. Then he laughed to himself. Severus frowned at the abrupt change in mood.

"Severus, I got divorced today. I'm single."

Severus opened his mouth, though unsure how to respond, closed it again quickly. He frowned, searching James' face for any sign of deception.

Severus' felt his heart race in his chest. There really was nothing holding them apart once the war was through. He really couldn't mess this up.

He cleared his throat, his face smoothing into the first smile for two months. "Single you say?"

James grinned. "Single."

"I don't think I like the idea of you being single," Severus mused darkly. He wound his hand into James' robes and pulled him forwards.

James hummed his approval, not waiting for permission before kissing Severus roughly on the mouth.

Severus deepened the kiss immediately, his hands moving to the other mans hips where he gripped so tightly James knew he would be bruised.

James was only aware that he was being pushed backwards when the back of his knees collided with the table. Severus didn't break their kiss as he pushed harder, til James was forced to lift himself up and sit on the wooden surface. Hands were in his hair, on his chest, running the length of his back. He couldn't breathe.

James wrenched his mouth away from Severus' and gasped. Before Severus could put any distance between them, James grabbed the other mans hands and rested their foreheads together, breathing harshly.

"What does Lily think about all this?" Severus asked slowly, pulling back to search James' face.  
"You haven't broken her heart?"

James shook his head guiltily. "I don't think so. It's been a long time coming. We both rushed into marriage when we weren't ready. Lily deserves better. So much better than what I shared with her. Whatever direction my life goes in now, she and I have done the right thing by Harry... And to ourselves."

Severus was quiet for so long, James thought he had changed his mind. His face had turned grim and his grip on James' sides had slipped away.

"I do not think you realise how much you have given up. If I am to disappoint-" he begun but James cut him off with a rough shake to his bony shoulders.

"The only way you could disappoint me is if you don't come back here alive. Your not a Death Eater any more, Severus. We can make this work."

When Severus looked at him then, it was with the ghost of a smile. Youth was brought back to his face with such gut-wrenching clarity that James cursed himself for the millionth time for ever letting Severus leave him three years ago. Never would he forgive himself for not saving Severus from all he'd had to endure.

Severus wry smile only grew deeper and he leaned closer towards James, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, his face contorted with pain and he hissed.

Grabbing at his arm, Severus expression turned bitter.

"No," James moaned. "Now?"

Severus cast him once last glance and nodded sharply. "Now."

James felt panic erupt inside him. He wanted to grab Severus and force him not to go. He barely trusted himself not to do so. He lowered himself onto a chair and swallowed down the impulse to vomit.

Severus was buttoning up his cloak, face pale and tense.

"If I could go in your place I would, you know," James said earnestly.

Severus snorted. "And what a perfect Death Eater you would make."

James watched Severus reach for his wand with a dark expression, his frown deep on his face. In that moment, he felt like he would never smile again.

Severus paused before he reached the door, and turned back. James knew that his reluctance to share a proper goodbye was imperative, though he hated himself for not having the strength to give the man one. If Severus got any nearer to him than he was already, he knew his resolve would crumble.

"I had every intention of fucking you on that table a moment ago," Severus shook his head bitterly, eyes dark and promising as they raked over James' hunched figure. "And now this."

James felt every inch of his disappointment. "We'll get our time," he swore quietly. "When Malfoy and Voldemort are dead."

His chest painfully tight, James turned his back and rested his elbows on the table, head in his hands. A minute later and he heard the door close, and let out a shaky breath. He'd really gone.

He had finally found Severus after three years, had him in his bed for one night and had to release him back to evil forces already. He felt powerless and weak, wishing with all of his might that he could have gone with the other man.

But this was one particular battle Severus was fighting alone. James could only thank Merlin that he was finally on the right side.

The firewhiskey James snatched for landed on the table unsteadily, nearly toppling over. He knew he would not be getting any sleep tonight.

## Chapter 23

If somebody had asked James a month ago if anything could be worse than Severus' absence in his life, he would have laughed in their face. At the present time, he would have given anything to have things the way they were, before he'd been confronted with the demons of his past.

James did not consider himself a coward but the situation he found himself in was disturbing, and he was too full of envy to accept his own irrationality. His son's life was in danger and the man he loved was a spy, creating the false pretense that he was working for the very twisted dark forces that threatened everything he'd worked for.

James was beginning to think the whole thing maybe was too messed up... that his life had taken a serious wrong turn somewhere along the way, leaving him completely lost.

He could not sleep. He could not eat. He could not bare to think about Severus... or the role he'd taken in the war. Lucius' lecherous, greedy hands on his flesh was more than James could physically stand.

Worst of all, he had guilt to contend with. There was no choice but to sleep at the Order headquarters. He had no where else to go. He couldn't give Lily the fresh start she deserved if he was sleeping on her couch every night. As much as he wanted to be close to Harry and protect them both, Dumbledore had assured him there was nothing else he could do. They were under the best possible protection.

He heard Severus return almost every night. He smelt the stench of alcohol, sweat and healing potions as it seeped under his door in the early hours of the morning. He did not know if the man was aware that James was staying there, but he never approached him. Never deliberately made his presence known. Never asked James to provide a shoulder to cry on...

It was a silent agreement, and James expected Severus could not bare to look at him either.

He listened as Severus stumbled into the room next door, throwing far too many wards against the door... too many considering he forgot about silencing spells. James rubbed a hand over his face, dizzy with headache as he tried to shut out the sobs and muffled curses through the flimsy walls that separated them.

He knew what Severus was doing was, in many ways, completely heroic. He was showing a bravery that was not born to him. And he was doing it all for redemption... for forgiveness. For James' son. It was all for them.

He wanted to help Severus. He wanted to console him more than anything, but could not have offered comfort if he'd tried. He was too furious... and too bitter. If he were to approach Severus he knew he would not be able to bite his tongue. His jealousy overrode any other noble emotion and it only intensified his resolve to let the man get on with it.

And besides, he had no idea what Severus was going through, and didn't pretend to. He avoided the Order meetings Severus was in, choosing instead to visit Lily and Harry. He got all the information he needed from Dumbledore.

He needed the war to be over. He'd had enough.

...

"Bee in your bonnet, James?"

Lily approached her ex-husband warily, pushing hot tea into his hands without waiting for him to reject it.

"Just worried, that's all," he muttered. "I don't like this." He waved his hands around vaguely. "You and Harry shouldn't have to be looking over your shoulder all the time."

Lily took a seat beside him, resisting the urge to wrap her arms around the man and attempt to release some of his stress.

"Severus is doing all that he can—"

"I know," James cut her off, just as he always did when the subject came up. "But it shouldn't be up to him to help us... I should be doing something! What if the information he needs doesn't get passed over? What if he can't do enough?"

"James..." Lily spoke quietly, placing a firm finger on James' chin so that he was forced to look at her. "Severus is a good man. You have to believe he is doing everything he can. But if he can't help us... you have to understand it's not his fault."

"I'm not saying it is," James argued, knocking her hand away gently to stand up and pace in-front of the fire place. "I just... I hate the thought that he's doing all of this for nothing. And there's a good chance he could be! If this plan to hurt Harry is as serious as Albus thinks, then Voldemort isn't going to tell Severus about it! He might even suspect he's a spy already."

"You're over-thinking," Lily insisted, though James could tell that she too had not been sleeping.

"Are you not frustrated?" he asked, irritated by her outward display of calmness. "When was the last time you even left the house?"

"Harry's safe here, James. That's all that matters. This won't last forever."

James shook his head angrily, but forced himself to sit back down, head in his hands.

"James..." Lily tried again. "Of course I'm angry... Of course I'm frustrated. But anyone can see the reason you're getting so upset about this... is because it's Severus whose in real danger. You love him James, it's natural to feel like this—"

"Is it natural for me to feel happy when he's fucking another man," James snapped and immediately wished he hadn't. "Sorry Lily, you don't need to hear this... It's not fair."

"Don't be stupid," she chastised softly. "I'm not angry with you because you're in love with him, James. I don't like the thought of him being caught up in this either. Nothing about this is fair."

"Lily, if You Know Who really wants Harry, I don't think anything will stop him... The best we're going to get is a warning. Severus is fighting a losing battle. All because he thinks he has to prove himself. I can't protect him, I can't protect you. Or Harry. What kind of a wizard am I? What kind of a man am I?"

"One of the bravest I know... And the most stubborn. If Severus can give us a warning, then we'll do what we can with that," she smiled sadly. "What more can I do, James?"

"Come and stay at Headquarters," he pleaded, not for the first time. "I'd feel so much safer if you were there. Plus I can see Harry more. And you can... You can talk to Severus? He can't do this by

himself."

"Then be there for him," Lily insisted. "He needs you now, more than ever. You've done so much for Harry and I these past few weeks, but there's nothing else you can do here."

"Move out of this house. Just temporarily," James repeated again, "Please Lily-"

"Headquarters has been moved twice already due to security issues," Lily explained, taking James' now-cold tea and disappearing into the kitchen. "We're safer here."

"I hope to God you're right," James muttered.

He hugged Lily tightly as he said goodbye, kissing her red hair with affection. "I'll come by again soon as I can," he promised. "If you need anything in the meantime... anything... even company... send me an owl, ok?"

...

James took a deep breath before he unlocked the door to Headquarters. He did not know if Severus would be here or not. The hour was late enough, but he knew the man did not always return after... work.

Darkness and silence met James' ears as he wandered hesitantly through the hallway to his room. He was almost grateful.

His conversation with Lily danced around his mind as he tried to sleep. Maybe he was over-reacting. Maybe things weren't going to be as bad as he'd been dreading.

James heard the front door close with a bang and groaned quietly beneath his bedsheets, pulling them tighter to his chin. He listened for the familiar sounds of bottles clinking and various objects being knocked over, but instead he could only make out footsteps on the stairs, and then the obvious sound of the door for the room opposite, opening and then closing.

James swallowed, listening intently, but the house was silent. He frowned into the darkness. A million scenarios immediately concocted themselves as to why tonight, of all nights, Severus was not causing a fuss. Perhaps Lucius had been easier on him tonight... Perhaps he'd found all he needed to know and left the Dark Lord's service for good... Maybe he had begun to enjoy being around Lucius... Maybe they were getting closer... Maybe he would not return to James once this was through...

With a great deal of force, James pushed back the sheets and opened his bedroom door in a t-shirt and boxers.

Heart beating heavily in his chest, James unlocked Severus' door with a flick of his wand and a few muttered spells and stepped inside.

He could not smell sweat... or blood... and there was no sound coming from the bundle curled around the sheets in the corner of the room.

"Severus?" he whispered cautiously.

He took another step closer and heard a soft snort. Yes, it was definitely Severus.

James felt relief, despite himself. It had been weeks since they'd been this close. The ache in his chest only grew heavier as he realised he only had to reach out, and Severus was right there.

He had no idea how Severus would react to his presence. He stood over the bed, but Severus' back was to him and he did not look up. James knew he was awake. His breathing was too erratic, and he was shaking too violently to have been sleeping.

This was the exact thing he had been so bone-deep frightened of. He did not trust himself with a Severus in this state. He was sorely tempted to return to his room, but now he'd allowed himself so close to the other man, his heart betrayed him, as he knew it would.

James knew he had to make a decision, and before he could change his mind, he gently pulled back the covers and lowered himself into the bed, expecting to be rejected. But Severus didn't move a muscle.

"You're shaking," James remarked, just because he could not think of anything else to say that would not sound completely patronising. He placed a hand on Severus' shoulder and winced when the man shook violently until it was dislodged.

"Severus..." James spoke again. He could feel the panic welling inside of him... the emotion, the pain, everything he'd been trying so hard to suppress by keeping his distance. "Severus, you are very close to breaking me. Don't... please?"

"If you cannot be around me at my worst... how can you expect to share in all this goodness you keep expecting from me?" Severus hissed, voice muffled by pillows.

James sighed, turning over onto his back and throwing a hand over his face. Even in their current situation, just being this close to Severus after this long was making him nervous.

"We're hardly conventional are we?" James sighed. "Conventional couples do not have to deal with infidelity."

He heard Severus' sharp intake of breath and already hated himself. He knew he'd do this... He couldn't help it. Even after everything Severus was sacrificing for him, James could not push aside his jealousy and be the supportive partner he needed him to be.

"Nor neglect..." Severus spoke quietly. "I just always imagined... you'd be rather more Gryffindor when it came to... such matters."

"I have no courage when it comes to you," James snapped back, growing restless. "You scare the shit out of me with these games, Severus."

"Games!" Severus repeated harshly, beginning to turn and then thinking better of it. He kept his back to James, breathing deeply.

"I do not want to fight with you," Severus said finally, sounding exhausted.

James turned on his side, unable to restrain himself from curling an arm round Severus' waist, impulse taking over. The other man tensed up, but did not move. James breathed a sigh of relief and pressed his face into the dark hair. It did not smell clean... It did not even smell like Severus.

James knew the implications this entire ordeal would have on their relationship. Trust... loyalty... Sex. It was not going to be easy.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, barely audibly. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

James was beginning to doze when he felt a long fingered hand curl around his wrist. Severus pulled it up to his chest and let out a deep sigh, and allowed James to pull him an inch closer.

"You have no idea how much I love you," James whispered sleepily.

The hold on his wrist grew tighter and they both slept soundly that night for the first time since Severus had become a spy.

...

Things began to get easier after that. They fell into a routine. There were no more empty firewhiskey bottles littering the kitchen in the mornings. Severus did not need such a distraction when exhaustion called him to sleep and his bed was no longer cold.

He was all too aware that James had stopped kissing him... Was barely touching him. He did not even know for whose benefit he was restraining himself. But he was both surprised and grateful for the lack of interrogation. And the fact that he never asked where he'd been... Or what he'd done. It was unnerving not to know whether his lover was disgusted or sympathetic, or too diseased by what he was being put through, but Severus did not dare ask.

James never encouraged him or told him that he was proud. Such words were beyond him.

But it was enough. His mere presence was the only answer Severus really needed. The warmth of James' body beside him, and an arm curled loosely around his waist was enough to keep the more intense nightmares at bay.

James had forced himself to attend all Order meetings. There was an ominous sense of restlessness in the air... Severus had begun to issue warnings. The raids they intercepted due to his inside information were countless.

At least James could console himself with the thought that Severus' sacrifice was not going to waste.

It was late in the evening when James was awoken to the worst night of his life. Severus had not yet returned, but it was nothing unusual. The level of activity suddenly thrust upon the quiet household however, was.

Headquarters had become a hub of noisy activity, despite the early hours. James dressed silently and without a second thought, pushing past aurors and ministry workers as he searched to find Dumbledore. He was in deep conversation with a number of witches and wizards when James approached him.

"Albus," he interrupted, unabashed. "What's going on? What's happened?"

Dumbledore visibly paled as James stared up at him, impatient for answers.

"James..." he began quietly, and by the tone of his voice alone James knew something was seriously wrong. His blood ran cold.

"Tell me it's not Harry," he whispered, eyes widening when Dumbledore failed to provide an answer.

"Albus!" he repeated, more urgently.

"Severus came to me not an hour ago," the older man breathed. "He knew they'd found out a way to get past the wards. I couldn't stop him... He found me and then he went straight to them."

James did not need to ask who. He did not think, only reacted, his mind-spinning and his heart

racing, beating almost painfully in his chest.

He did not hear the Headmaster call him back. The sounds of the world had muted to the shocked man as he pushed his way violently to the front door. He was vaguely aware of strong hands grabbing at his arms, trying to pull him back, but adrenaline was coursing through his veins and he threw them off with all of the force he could muster.

As soon as he'd stepped out of the front door, he apparated. There was only one destination on his mind.

Smoke and ash filled James' lungs the moment he landed. He stumbled, his lack of concentration and heightened emotional state having a detrimental effect on his magic.

"No..." he gasped, barely believing the pitiful sight he was forced to witness.

The house he and Lily had bought together was a wreck, thick black fog and debris disguising the once beautiful property, so that all James could see was ruin.

He stumbled forward in a daze, snatching for his wand with shaking fingers. It took him longer than it should have done to find the front door. He could barely recognise the building. Finding the stairway intact, he called out as loud as he could with ash clogging at his throat.

"Lily?" he spluttered, half-crawling to their bedroom, praying to god she had managed to escape.

James strained his ears, a strong wave of relief nearly winding him when he heard clearly the sound of an infant crying.

He kicked open the bedroom door and felt his world come crashing down.

He did not need to turn over the body on the floor to know that it was Lily. Her red hair was splayed out across her face, arms and legs tangled at awkward angles.

He felt his knees buckle and crouched down beside her, his wand dropping uselessly to the floor. He placed a hand on her back, but he already knew that she was dead.

He stood up sharply, feeling the strong urge to vomit, his mind jumping erratically to thoughts of his son.

Harry was stood up in his crib, staring at his father, his eyes wide and fearful. There was blood on his forehead.

It was only when he jerked his foot forwards and tripped that James realised there was another body on the floor. He had not noticed at first. The black of the man's cloak was too covered in ash and debris.

James felt every last ounce of hope leave his body as he scrunched his eyes shut against the sight of Severus' pale face, stained with blood and unmoving. His head swam with dizziness, shock and disbelief paralysing him from accepting the inevitable.

Harry was shaking the bars on his crib frantically, tears dripping down his plump cheeks, demanding his fathers attention.

James blinked back the heaviness in his eyes and pulled the boy to his chest with the last of his strength, and slumped against the bed. There was no air in his lungs as he buried his face in the infants hair, his chest constricting so tightly he thought he would suffocate. His whole body was

numb.

Harry's small hands dug into his robes just to cling on as the man was shaking so hard.

He was aware of the house falling apart around him, of the ash settling in Harry's hair, and the dust falling upon Severus' body so that he was barely recognisable. He could not even see the red of Lily's hair anymore. It was black and filthy...

James kept his eyes closed, cradled Harry and screamed until his voice was hoarse.

## Chapter 24

It was against his better nature to carelessly bask in victory after such a hard fought battle, where so many lives had been lost. Dumbledore did however, reluctantly accept the sherry that Minerva McGonagall was pressing insistently into his hands.

"The whole wizarding world is celebrating, Albus," she muttered, though it had not gone unnoticed that she also remained entirely sober. "You may as well join in."

The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix was almost eerily quiet compared to the fireworks, sizzling and catapulting in the distance. They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, the long wooden table once used so regularly for meetings entirely empty, except for the two of them. It had taken less time than they'd expected to disband the group, considering how long they'd spent together.

The end of the war had been dreamt of so often, Dumbledore doubted Voldemort's physical re-embodiment this very night would placate the crowds.

"There is much to celebrate," he agreed solemnly. "But for those who have lost loved ones, it is not a time to be tempting fate, Minerva."

"They've had little to celebrate for a long time."

"Hm," he sighed, rubbing his beard thoughtfully for a moment before nudging the drink away with a distasteful expression. "We have all worked hard for a day such as this one."

"Do you think he's really gone?" Minerva asked hesitantly, as though she was unsure as to whether she wanted an answer. "You Know Who? Will he come back, Albus?"

"I have no doubt that he will find a way. For the moment at least, it seems, he has indeed gone."

"And the Potter boy? Harry?"

"Fit and well," Dumbledore answered, a ghost of a smile breaking through his somber expression. "And in the care of his father."

"Still no idea how he did it?" Minerva pressed.

"I have many theories."

When Dumbledore failed to elaborate any further, she smiled tensely and changed the subject.

"Has James... Has he spoken-"

"Not a word," Albus cut her off. "Poor man... He will, in time, realise how lucky he is. For now, he may not feel it. Harry shall need him now, more than ever."

Minerva flinched. "Lucky?"

Dumbledore turned to her with a small wink. "James lost one of three, my dear. Lily Potter will be remembered in all of eternity for the sacrifice she made. However, Severus Snape is very much alive. James has much to be thankful for, considering."

James nearly fell out of his chair when the hand he'd been clutching tightly was wrenched into the

air without warning.

"Severus," he gasped immediately as the sleeping Slytherin regained consciousness for the first time in three days. "It's alright. You're safe~"

"Lily, Harry...The Dark Lord. Lily... James you must know~" Severus stared at James imploringly, eyes straining to take focus.

"I know Severus. I know."

James slumped back in his chair and wiped the sleep from his eyes as nurses burst into the room and hustled around Severus, making alterations and checking his vitals.

When they seemed satisfied enough, or Severus' impatient twisting and turning caused them to give up, they left.

"What am i doing here? How long must i stay~" he snapped, blinking at his surroundings as though dazed.

"I dont know~"

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be..."

"Shouldn't i be doing what?" James asked tiredly when Severus failed to finish his sentence.  
"There's something more important than guarding you at your bedside?"

James attempted a smirk, but it materialized as more of a grimace. He shuffled closer and took Severus' face roughly in his fingers, peering closely at him.

He was deathly pale and covered in scratches. Other than that, it appeared the spell that had rebounded off of Harry had only knocked him out.

"You dont know how glad I am your not dead," he stated seriously.

Severus slapped his hand away and glared. He glanced around again at the room and his pale bedsheets, and attempted to sit up.

"I do not understand..." he begun, frowning his confusion. "How am I alive? Where is The Dark Lord?"

James managed a small smile. "Well it seems like we have Harry to thank for that. He's gone, Severus. He tried to kill Harry and the curse rebounded onto him. At least that's what Dumbledore's been telling everybody. Its impossible to know what really happened. Unless you saw..."

Severus grew, if possible, even paler. He shifted awkwardly back against his pillow and made an obvious attempt to calm his breathing.

"Lucius," he breathed finally. "Is he..."

"No, he's alive," James answered bitterly, and was selfishly glad when Severus did not seem pleased by the prospect. "And claiming that he was brainwashed apparently."

Severus snorted, his repulsion evident.

James did not have the strength to handle a conversation containing Lucius Malfoy in his current state. Instead, he leaned forwards and asked quietly, "What happened, Severus?"

"I got a warning, but it was too late by the time I arrived," he answered bitterly, barely audibly. "The Dark Lord only had to take one look at me and know I'd betrayed him. There was no other way I could have been there. Lily was already..." Severus closed his eyes and hissed through his teeth. "He had no patience for her. He only wanted the boy. He would have killed me immediately, had he not shown a greater preference that I watch Lily's son die... I had not managed to save her. I'm sure the Dark Lord would have taken great pleasure in showing me that I had also failed to protect her son."

James watched the other man intently, his jaw set in a firm grimace. "Why didn't you come to me? As soon as you'd found out, why didn't you find me?"

Severus snorted, "You would be dead also. There is nothing you could have done. Nobody stands in the way of the Dark Lord and survives."

"You did," James snapped. "Harry did."

"And Lily did not!" Severus attempted once more to get out of bed but James pushed him back, easily stronger than the other man in his weakened state.

Severus glared at him. "I found Albus. I gave him my word that if I knew anything, I would first tell the Order. If I had followed my emotions, James then I would be in Azkaban and you would be dead. I could hardly prove my innocence if found by the Dark Lord's side that night without pre-warning!"

"I know, I know." James rubbed his face tiredly. "But Lily's..."

"Dead," Severus finished grimly.

"Yes," James flinched. "And I wasn't there.. I did nothing to help her-"

"And now Harry has a father," Severus argued quietly. "You would have died James. The only reason I am alive is so that I could be punished. He would not have given you a second thought."

They sat in a strained silence for a long while, neither knowing what to say to surmise exactly what they'd been through.

"How could one child defeat the Dark Lord?" Severus whispered finally, eyes closed. "After all this time. What kind of power does that boy of yours possess?"

James shrugged his shoulders. He had no answer. He'd had only a little longer than Severus to try to absorb all that had happened.

"Da..."

They both jumped at the sound of the gurgling infant. Remus had Harry held in his arms, one foot propping the door open. James stood up and took Harry, smiling warmly as he kissed the boy's cheek.

"We've been staying just round the corner," he explained to Severus, stepping aside so Remus could come in. "Waiting for you to wake up."

"I wouldn't have brought him in here, James but there's somebody I need to see," Remus apologised. "No one knows he's here. You should have some peace for the moment at least."

"Thanks Remus," James smiled. "See you later?"

Remus nodded, resting a hand on James' shoulder and squeezing briefly before ruffling Harry's hair affectionately.

"Severus," he nodded politely towards the wounded man. "I think we all you a debt of gratitude-"

"Save it," Severus replied, unwilling to let him finish. Any further scathing remarks died before they could materialize. He had no idea how to respond to any such sentiments, and he could not find the energy to argue.

Remus cast him a final glance, and with a moments hesitation, nodded and left.

"Don't know what I would have done without him these last few days," James muttered, re-taking his seat with Harry on his lap. The infant didn't want to relax however, and was obviously restless. He climbed across onto the bed and was prodding at Severus before James could stop him.

"He's so quick," James grumbled, snatching him back. "The moment I take my eyes off him he's up to mischief."

Severus snorted softly, watching Harry wriggle in the man's lap.

"And now he's the talk of the wizarding world. He'll be famous his whole life for this."

Severus frowned, eyeing the boy with deep curiosity. "May I?" he asked hesitantly.

James narrowed his eyes, but he could read only wonder on Severus' face and nodded, dropping the boy onto the bed.

Severus swept Harry's dark fringe aside, one long finger tracing his lightening bolt scar.

"A curse from the Dark Lord and nothing but a scar," he murmured. "How did you do it boy?"

Harry stared back at him for a moment, then losing interest, burped loudly in Severus' face and climbed across him unceremoniously to reach the other side of the bed.

James laughed quietly. "Not had much experience with children I guess?"

"No," Severus answered simply. "And nor will i."

James blinked, taken aback by the abrupt statement. He cleared his throat and avoided the other man's eyes. He heard Severus sigh.

"I did not mean..." he begun awkwardly. "They have never been a part of the plan-"

"They always were to Lily," James cut across him, eyes trained on his son's face. "It was all she ever talked about before we got married. She always wanted them."

"James..."

"There is no way to make this better, Severus! What am I supposed to say to him? How do I explain that he's going to have to grow up without a mother?"

"You could start..." Severus begun, "with appreciating the fact that you are alive. He is not the only child to lose a parent to the war. He is lucky to have a father and can be raised to believe such."

James raked a hand through his hair. "But... What about a woman's touch? His mother's love? Lily always knew the right songs to sing to get him to sleep... the right things to say when he was

having a tantrum. And now she's never going to hold him again. She won't see him grow up. I promised her she would get a second chance at life... at happiness and now look what mess we're in."

"It is not your fault she is dead," Severus said sternly. "And your son will not forget her. Not if you do not allow him to-"

He hesitated as he became aware of Harry's dribble on his sleeve. The boy was attempting to examine his fingers.

Severus frowned and brought his hand up to his chest protectively. "What does he want?"

James rolled his eyes. "He's only a child, Severus. He doesn't want anything, and everything at the same time. You're just a fresh face for him to play with."

Severus tutted loudly when he boy tugged on his bedsheets, leaning in closer to re-gain his attention.

"Then you have answered your own question. Love him, James, as you Gryffindors do so well and he shall want for nothing. When the time comes, he will know everything. Lily can be mourned. It is your job to make sure this boy suffers as little as possible-"

Severus snatched for the boy's wrist as he continued to irritate him for his own amusement. "Or adoption is always an issue."

Harry giggled as Severus retained a loose grip on his arm, keeping him still.

James watched the two interact with light amusement. "You know, Severus you're a lot wiser than you're given credit for."

"You are considering adoption?" Severus asked, surprised.

James laughed. "No, of course not. But the other stuff. You're always good to talk to. Thank you."

They held each other's gaze for a moment and smiled.

It didn't last long, however. The expression felt unnatural on James' face and he rubbed irritably at his cheeks.

"You're tired," Severus noted seriously.

"I've been waiting for you to wake up," James said, stifling a yawn. "The last few days have been... hard. Lily's gone. It's been a lot to get my head around. It's all happened so fast. Seeing you both like that... I don't think I'll ever get that picture out of my mind. And the whole world is celebrating. My son is a celebrity. I'm furious with Albus. I didn't know whether you were going to get better. Harry won't sleep properly. I can't sleep properly."

Severus stared at him, a rare edge of sympathy to his expression. "You're in shock."

"Probably," James sighed. "But I'm so glad you're awake-"

He was interrupted as the door opened. Remus has returned.

"Hey," he greeted them, a little paler than normal. "James... I've brought you a visitor. I hope you don't mind."

James frowned, really not in the mood for company. "What do you mean. Who?"

"Severus," Remus ignored him and turned to the other man. "I know you've only just woken up and you may not be feeling up to this but... I think you both needed to be here at the same time for this."

Before they could question him any further, Remus had stepped inside, making room for another man to follow him in.

James froze. "Sirius?"

"It's been three and a half years, James... At least hear him out."

James stood up automatically, fingers grasping for his wand through his pocket and stared at his old friend. Since the night of the Ball, he'd had very little to do with Sirius Black. The last year of school had been uncomfortable for them both. James had refused any contact with the other boy, and Sirius had been equally as absent.

Now, however, Sirius had grown into a man. James could tell already that he was an inch taller than him and he'd grown his hair long. It hung dark and shiny at his shoulders. He had lost none of his good looks.

"James," he responded politely, taking a defensive stance beside Remus. He was not hiding his nerves well.

James threw Remus an irritated glance and shook his head in weary disbelief. They'd been through so much in the last week... months even, he wasn't sure he could take this on top of everything else.

Sirius' dark gaze moved to the man on the bed and James instantly felt himself tense.

He turned round. Severus' eyes were wide, as he'd expected them to be and he looked less than pleased.

"Alright?" he asked quietly.

It was a show of how strong his emotions for James were than Severus inclined his head.

Harry watched the proceedings with a curious expression. Tired of wrestling with Severus, he yawned and turned himself round awkwardly, bumping Severus' bruised side consequently. He climbed onto his lap, wiping dribble across the sheets as he pressed his back against the man's chest without waiting for permission, and watched his father converse.

Distracted, Severus' attention was on Sirius as he absently pulled his extra blanket up to the boy's chin and moved his bandaged hands to rest on his shoulders, preventing him from fidgeting.

"Severus has been in a nasty... situation," James explained. "Whatever it is, you'll have to make it quick."

When Sirius remained silent, Remus nudged him slightly, forcing him to speak.

"I just... I wanted to see how you were, more than anything. I heard what happened. Everyone has. What happened to Lily... And your house. Its terrible. It made me realise, not for the first time, that its been a huge mistake not being in your life, James. I could have helped... I could have done something-"

"There's nothing you could have done," James replied quietly, not unkindly. "You Know Who

wanted my son dead. It was only a matter of time before he found him."

"It's true then? Harry stopped You Know Who?" Sirius stared at Harry, his face unreadable as he took in his intimate position with Severus. "He hasn't got a scratch on him?"

"Just a scar," James answered simply. He dropped back into his chair and smiled at Harry.

Sirius took a hesitant step further into the room.

James watched the increasing measure of displeasure flit across Severus' face with sympathy. He could tell he felt uncomfortable being so vulnerable in Sirius' presence, the height difference not helping.

"Sit down," James offered reluctantly, "And you, Remus."

They sat in awkward silence for a moment, before Sirius cleared his throat. "Have you set a date for the funeral?"

"Not yet," James snapped, a little too fast. "It's only been a few days."

"Right. I'm sorry."

"You plan on coming?"

"I'd like to," Sirius answered cautiously. "She was never my friend as such but... Lily Evans was a good person. And she died protecting her son. She never deserved-"

"I know she didn't," James cut in, unwilling to discuss Lily any further. It made his stomach churn. "And Harry doesn't deserve to be without a mother."

"Of course not," Sirius agreed. "But he has two fathers now at least."

James snapped his eyes up, warning, but Sirius' expression was neutral. "What? Did I say something wrong?"

"I told him you and Lily were divorced," Remus explained quickly.

"Oh did you?" James rolled his eyes, feigning surprise. "He knows it all does he-"

"James," Severus spoke for the first time, quietening him with an unspoken warning. He turned to Sirius, face pale and tense. He was no longer a school boy. He had been through a lot since he'd been forced into unbearable humiliation. It no longer haunted him. He and James had reconciled, that was enough for him. The mere memory of rotating through the air as hundreds of pupils laughed, however, still made him shiver. There was no doubt in his mind that he would never forgive the man.

Sirius blinked and Severus could tell he was surprised by his lack of fear.

"I have no quarrel with you Snape," he said quietly, shaking his head. "I'm here to see James. And if you two are...together, then I respect that."

"You do?" James asked incredulously. "Three years later and it's suddenly alright that I'm in love with a man."

"I was a kid, James!" Sirius snapped, "How was I supposed to react? You helped plan that bet. You had every intention of hurting him and then you turn round and expect us to understand that you

want to be with him? You made me a joke that day, just as much as I did you. Except the only difference is, I didn't change. You did."

"Well maybe I needed to."

Sirius sighed loudly, obviously determined not to be beaten. "I didn't come here to talk about the past-"

"Do you have any idea what you did?" James snarled at him, trying for the sake of Harry's presence not to release years of pent up anger in one go. "Do you have any idea what it feels like to be spun round through the air with your trousers round your ankles?"

"Do you?" Sirius countered quietly.

James' eyes widened, "that's not the point-"

"It's exactly the point! It took you falling in love to realise that you were a bully. You changed your mind about that night behind my back!" Sirius argued. "I didn't have any time to digest what in Merlin's name was going on. I was in shock. It hurt, James. You were my best friend and it felt like you betrayed me. I did whatever I could to hurt you back. And to be fair, all I did was what we set out to do in the first place. He would have found out eventually about the bet."

"It didn't have to be like that."

"No," Sirius accepted. "But none of the other Slytherin's we bullied at school deserved to be humiliated either. But you were fine with it before. But then you had love on your side and had an epiphany! What did I have to make me want to change in the space of a few months?"

Sirius frowned intently at James, and pressed on when he didn't answer. "I wasn't ready to end the marauders then. It took me a lot longer to realise how bad we had become, James."

James blew out a breath and rubbed his hands over his face. "But you do now?"

Sirius nodded.

"You got a second chance, James," Remus spoke quietly from the corner. "Don't you think he does too?"

The four men looked at each other, calculating and defensive, and finally James snorted, completely fatigued. "How the hell did we get here?"

Sirius shrugged and stood up, glancing at James before surprising them all and holding out his hand to Severus. "We've all made mistakes. For whatever part I played in your childhood misery... I... apologise. But I like to think I'm a man now. And If you and James come as a package, then I won't ever hurt you again."

Severus stared up at him with distaste. "How wonderful," he muttered sarcastically.

After being so responsible for giving him such a horrendous school experience, Severus did not find it so easy to forgive. The only thing swaying him towards accepting such a belated apology was the simple fact that he was in love with the only man who made his teenage life worse than Sirius had. It was not impossible for him to leave the past where it was.

Besides, some of the gruesome tasks set by Voldemort had been far worse than Sirius' failings as a child.

As much as he loathed to admit it, he knew James could release a lot of his long-term inner turmoil if he were to reconcile with his old school friend. And one of the many weaknesses he felt in being in love was that, no matter the situation, his heart seemed to want to put James' interests first.

"You were a devil of a child and I sinned as a man," Severus answered finally, without emotion. "If it were not for James I would not come within a mile of you, Black. As things are..." Severus glanced at James, unable to conceal the hope and warmth in his eyes. He swallowed sharply and before he could chance his mind, rolled his eyes to the ceiling and said blandly, "I can accept the past."

Sirius grinned his approval, barely managing to hide his surprise, and motioned towards his outstretched hand, and Severus snorted. "Oh, I don't think so. Not today."

Sirius sighed and shook his head. "I'll keep working on it, Snape." He turned back to James. He did not want to push his luck. "I'll send you an owl. When you're all settled down, I'll visit. Or you come to me. Or we can go into Diagon Alley. Or..."

"Alright, Sirius," James agreed, before the man got carried away. He could not help but smile slightly. Sirius appeared to have changed so much, yet at the same time, being in his presence felt so familiar. Not in a million years had he expected an apology from him.

It appeared at though Sirius was going to hug him, but he seemed to think better of it. He smiled instead and shook James' hand. "Soon then," he promised, and left, with a grinning Remus not far behind.

"That was strange," James shook his head in disbelief and sat back down. It did feel as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Despite himself, life seemed a degree brighter with the thought of having begun putting that particular inner demon to rest.

"You sure you're alright with us talking again?"

"No," Severus answered sharply, still staring at the door with distaste. "But," he added reluctantly, when James looked worried, "I can learn to compromise."

The nurses returned again with a full trained healer before James could respond, and an hour later, Severus was discharged. James, and a very unhelpful but determined Harry, helped the wounded man into shirt, jacket and shoes.

"We really have got a lot to talk about haven't we," James sighed as he half-carried Severus into the lift. "Lots to sort out..."

Harry clung happily to his leg as the doors closed behind them.

"Yes," Severus agreed reluctantly, casting a sideways glance at Harry. "But we have all the time in the world. Don't we?"

James smiled widely, and finally it did not feel such an alien sensation. Looping his arm round Severus' bony shoulders, he pressed a wet kiss to his bandaged temple. His relief that the man was healthy, and not going to die, was beginning to sink in.

"I love you."

"You say that far too often," Severus chastised softly, his lips twitching slightly but he wiped his head with disapproval. It had been a long time since James had shown him any physical affection, and as much as he had craved it, it would take a while before he was again comfortable with such

an outward display of emotion.

"But you smile every time I do," James argued lightly, making a brave decision to reach down and take the man's hand in his own. He was fully aware of their renewed contact and all it implied, but he refused to allow even the thought of Lucius to deter from his current sense of hope. He'd waited a long time to feel this free.

Severus raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. He felt a sharp tug at his trousers as the lift lurched and found Harry trying, unsuccessfully to climb up his leg.

He sighed and reached down. He glanced at James, who nodded his permission, and picked up the child.

"You are a pain," he muttered, close to the boy's face, "and you look far too much like your father."

James snorted. "He doesn't know how lucky he is."

"And you have your mother's eyes," he added quietly, and felt James' tense up beside him.

"And I shall make sure that I remind you of that fact, every day until you are sick of me saying it."

James relaxed slightly and smiled again, something he was doing more and more as the hours in Severus' company drew on.

"We're going to be fine, aren't we," he said suddenly. "All this stuff that has happened... You won't bail on me will you? We will get through it? This is it now. It's our time."

It wasn't a question Severus could answer properly at that moment, but he knew the man needed the encouragement of a straight answer. He leaned over and pressed a firm kiss to the side of James' mouth, and before he could think of a reason not to, placed a delicate second on his cheek.

"Unconventional but fine, yes," he agreed firmly. And he had no real doubt that they would be. It would not be easy, but he was more than willing, for happiness sake, to overcome any obstacles life had yet to throw at them. He would force himself to be optimistic, for both their sakes.

They'd been through so much already, and James had not left him. It gave Severus a strange sort of empowerment to feel that loved. It made him fearless, and selfishly and undeniably willing to accept a future that contained his own contentment. The inner demons he had yet to face seemed a whole lot smaller with James back by his side.

James opened the door for him as they left the hospital, and Severus blinked against the harsh light of daylight.

He trailed behind as he watched James and the small infant argue and play as they pushed their way through the busy high street, avoiding the crowds and headed towards a home he had yet no knowledge of.

Somehow, today, the air smelt fresher, and the shadows of his past a little dimmer. He cast a glance towards the sky and sent a thousand silent thoughts towards Lily. He felt shame in the growing sense of possession he felt over the family she had once called her own, but a greater sense of responsibility that he would keep them from harm, and bring a wholeness back to James' life that he'd never really regained when they'd been separated.

Against his nature, he would not cower from the unknown, and allow himself to take a place in a world that did not contain daily darkness and despair. He felt excited and dizzy with hope over the

prospect of his future, for the first time, in a very long time.

## Epilogue

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry Potter stared up for the first time at the many luminous lights shining out from Hogwarts castle, his mouth hung open with silent admiration. Train smoke buffeted around him, noisy students jostling their way past the Boy Who Lived with frantic whispers. He ignored them, too preoccupied with his own wildly escalating expectations, as he tried to count the hundreds of windows and stone turrets in the distance.

"Come on Harry," called the red-haired Weasley Harry had met on the train. He was waving impatiently from the end of the platform, a fat rat clinging precariously from his elbow.

Harry needed no further encouragement, he grinned widely at his friend and they hurried along with the rest of the first-years. Time seemed to be speeding them along much faster than Harry would have liked, as before he knew it, they had been ushered through huge oak front doors and through another passageway, and another...

His hands felt clammy, nerves pooling in his stomach. But they were nothing compared to his excitement. Following a bushy haired girl with a constant, irritating desire to correct him, Harry entered the Great Hall full of hope and wonder.

He barely heard Professor McGonagall begin to read out the children's names, calling them forward to be sorted. There was too much to take in. Starry ceilings, candlelit walls, ghosts... And hundreds and hundreds of new faces.

It was with a sudden jolt of remembrance that Harry spun his gaze onto the head table. His wide eyes had made it half way along the sea of older faces, before insistent nudges at his elbow caused him to blink, losing concentration.

"Harry Potter," McGonagall called again. "Up here, if you please."

Harry gulped and stepped forward on shaky legs. He sat down, all to aware on all of the whispering and pointing. He was used to it by now, but he'd never grown to appreciate it.

McGonagall was smiling encouragingly at him, but Harry felt a sudden wave of panic. He put his hand up quickly to intercept the large hat bound for his head and spun round once again, eyes searching the head table more insistently this time.

He passed Dumbledore, who smiled knowingly, until two black eyes at the very end of the table ended his search.

Harry sighed in relief, body sagging a little. He smiled widely at the Potions Master. The man shook his head slightly, as though in exasperation, but Harry knew the grouchy man far too well by now. There was deep affection well-masked beneath his grim exterior.

He gave the small boy a minuscule nod of encouragement, unable to entirely hide his curiosity that mirrored those surrounding him. Harry turned back round and closed his eyes and felt the Sorting Hat lowered onto his head, falling far over his eyes.

He said nothing, thought nothing, only gentle interest as the clever hat worked out where to put him. Harry was not particularly worried where he was put, though he had a certain preference... All

houses were equally as respectable, he knew that well.

"Gryffindor," the hat shouted finally and Harry immediately stood up.

The cheers were deafening. He could not help but throw a challenging wink at Severus. The man merely cocked his head, shaking it a little, one eyebrow raised. He did not look surprised.

The feast was over far too quickly for Harry's liking. He wanted to saviour every moment, every conversation... It was with heavy feet and a reluctant yawn that the followed his fellow classmates out of the Great Hall.

His face almost hurt from smiling. He'd made it through his first evening at Hogwarts.

"Hey, Potter! Let me see your scar!"

Harry sighed, turning round reluctantly and coming face to face with a pale-faced blonde.

"Malfoy," he acknowledged grimly. He'd been hoping he could have saved this confrontation for a later day. He'd been warned about this particular boy, and for good reason it seemed.

"It's even uglier than in the papers," the Slytherin remarked coldly. "You better watch it this year, Potter. If you think-"

"If he thinks what?" came a deep voice from behind them.

Harry stuffed the wand he'd drawn back into his trousers, hands behind his back and a picture of innocence. Malfoy looked extremely put out at being interrupted. The rest of the students filed past until the three of them remained in the corridor, a tense silence hanging between them.

Malfoy stared defiantly at his new Head of House, arms crossed. Severus walked slowly towards him, no particular malice on his face, but strong disapproval. He had learnt many years ago that to hate was an emotion he could avoid at all costs. This boy held no threat to him.

"To bed. Now. I am loathe to take points from my own house."

Malfoy opened his mouth to argue, but seemed to think better of it. He shot a final spiteful glance at Harry.

"Daddy won't always be here to protect you," he hissed, turning on his heel and marching off to the dungeons.

Severus stared after him, a small frown on his face. When he turned back to Harry, his expression was serious.

"Do not provoke him in future, Potter," he warned. "The Malfoys are not an enemy you need."

"They're already an enemy," Harry muttered.

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Severus spoke over him, softly menacing. "For loitering in the corridors..."

Harry gaped at him, open mouthed. "But term hasn't even started yet! Malfoy spoke to me!"

"And in engaging him in such highly intelligent conversation, where have you found yourself?" Severus reprimanded. "Where are your fellow Gryffindors? Or do you already know your way to the Gryffindor common room? Are you that bigheaded to think you should already have attained

such knowledge when your fellow first years have remained unaware?"

Harry scowled at him. Severus merely raised an eyebrow and sighed.

"Since when was I Potter?" he asked.

Severus tutted loudly. "Do not sulk. It does not become you. Now follow me," he beckoned, leading the way up the stairs.

Harry hesitated, irritated.

Severus turned, a warning on his face. "Follow me," he repeated firmly. "You can't stand there all night. Unless you wish for me to take another ten points from—"

Harry grunted, darting up the stairs before he could finish his sentence and fell into step beside the potion master as he led him up seven floors.

The castle was even bigger than Harry had imagined. And he had imagined often. He was so distracted, head turning this way and that to take in his new surroundings, that he hadn't notice the hand that had come to rest on his shoulder, steering him clear of hidden traps, invisible stairs and such obstacles.

When he did, he rolled his eyes and glanced upwards.

"Thanks, Severus."

"Professor Snape within Hogwarts," Severus reminded firmly, though not unkindly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Really?"

Severus nodded seriously, though the hand that remained on the boy's shoulder squeezed momentarily, and without warning, he pulled him firmly forwards. Harry's arms encircled the man's waist easily, and he breathed in the musty smell he knew so well.

"I can come and see you in the dungeons whenever I want though, right?" he asked quietly, poorly concealing the hope in his voice. "Dad said he visited you, so does that mean I can as well?"

Severus hummed his approval, and Harry felt it vibrate through his chest and smiled.

When Severus finally nudged him back, Harry's smile was wide. Severus could not help but offer a small smile in return, the boy's happiness was infectious. He looked so much like James it was ridiculous.

"I shall send your father an owl," he said. "I'm sure he'll be just delighted that you got yourself stuck with the lions..."

Harry laughed, knowing how proud his dad would be. His face fell slightly, as he remembered just how it was he knew there'd be no chance he'd end up in Slytherin.

"Do you think Lily... my mum... would she be happy that I'm here?" Harry asked tentatively. His mother was not a subject that had ever been avoided, but it wasn't one they widely discussed either. Severus had never deterred him from asking such questions in the past, so Harry felt no fear in sharing his troubles.

"More than anything," he answered quietly. When Harry continued to frown, he was forced to elaborate. "She was every inch a Gryffindor, Harry. As was and is, your father. There is no reason

you should be anywhere else. There is little you could do to cease them both having great pride in you." He hesitated, eyes sweeping the young boy with a barely concealed affection and familiarity. "And I also."

Harry smiled gratefully.

"Now go," Severus insisted. "Enough of your sentimentality. Cause mischief. And Potter?"

Harry turned back, "yes, Professor."

"If Malfoy bothers you again, come straight to me. Do you understand?"

Harry saw no signs of joking on the man's face. He nodded, grinned one last time and clambered through the portrait.

Severus sighed as Harry disappeared, ignoring the protests of the fat lady against the Head of Slytherin House and headed straight to the owlery.

The first few months Harry spent at Hogwarts passed much the same as his first day; with great speed. There was so much to learn, so many places to explore and new friends to make... and enemies also, that he quickly found himself wrapped up in all things magical.

It was only when he received an untidy scrawl from a rather persistent black owl, that Harry realised he may have been a lot less dependent on his one link from home than he thought. Harry read the note guiltily.

If you could spare a moment outside of classes, one might believe they haven't entirely been forgotten.

S. Snape

Harry headed straight to the dungeons after breakfast, tie loose and school-bag slung over his shoulder.

The door to Severus' office flung open before Harry had even knocked. He swallowed as Severus towered over him.

"Have you finished your potions homework?" he asked immediately.

Harry frowned. "I thought you wanted to see me, not talk about homework."

"Are the two things exclusively different?"

"Guess not," Harry grumbled. "And no, not yet. Unless you fancy letting me off this one?"

"Not a chance," Snape answered immediately, not that Harry was surprised.

"You're right," he agreed, with amusement. "You're the strictest of all the teachers... Nobody likes your class. Except the Slytherins..."

"Is that so?" Severus asked with a raised eyebrow, unperturbed. He pushed the door open a little wider with unspoken invitation and Harry stepped inside with a grin.

"Well you are quite..." Harry begun but faltered, as he noted the man sitting behind Severus' desk, a huge grin on his face.

Severus closed the door behind him and smirked. "He's not here all day, Potter. Hurry up." He nudged Harry in the back and the boy blinked away his surprise and ran forwards.

"Dad!"

James grinned widely as Harry threw his arms around him, squeezing the breath from his body. He pulled the boy closer still, remaining seated as when he stood Harry barely came up to his belly button.

Harry's face buried in his chest, James raked his hand through the messy hair he had inherited and smiled warmly at Severus over the top of his head.

Severus watched the familiar scene of the two embracing and sat at the other side of his desk, billowing robes folded beneath him.

"You've missed me?" James chuckled approvingly, slowly encouraging Harry to let him go so he could get a proper look at him. This had been the longest they'd been apart since the boy was born 11 years ago. "You haven't grown much then."

Harry tried to frown, but his smile was fixed. "Have to! Haven't I, Severus?"

Severus ignored the use of his first name in the confines of his office and raised an eyebrow. "How would I know?" he answered easily, with amusement. "You barely make your presence known. You gallivant around the castle just as your father did, paying no mind to the like of a Slytherin such as myself."

Harry shook his head at Severus, too used to the man's unique, often sadistic sense of humour to take his insults too seriously. When he was truly angry, he knew it, but now wasn't one of those times.

He hugged his father again and James mused at how much Harry mirrored himself when he was that age. In looks at least. He much more had Lily's heart. He certainly had her eyes. He would not be worried about Harry following the immature path of bullying and popularity and attention seeking, as he had done.

Harry was not that kind of person.

"So have you made any new friends?" he asked brightly, pulling Harry's small form up with ease so that he could make the most of Harry sitting on his lap before he finally did get too old.

As it was, Harry keenly filled him in on his first two months of Hogwarts, while James and Severus listened patiently and with interest, knowing only too well that youth and all of its innocence was something to be treasured.

When it was time for Harry to leave for his first class, James kissed him fondly on the cheek and nudged him off his lap.

"I'll see you at Christmas," he promised. "I have work to do with Dumbledore, so we'll stay at the castle for the holidays for this year. That alright with you?"

"Yep," Harry beamed. "As long as I don't have to sleep in the dungeons."

"Tsk," Snape reprimanded lightly, placing a hand on the boy's head as he walked past, dispelling the dark locks into even greater disarray.

Harry smiled. "I'll catch up with you soon, Severus," he said earnestly. "And you'll be at my first quidditch match won't you? And you'll tell dad how it went. And that I won! Even If I didn't."

Severus snorted. "And Gryffindors are supposed to be honest." He shook his head at James, who merely smiled, and opened the door for Harry.

"See you soon, Dad," Harry grinned and sprinted off to his first class.

Severus watched him disappear up the corridor before closing the doors. Harry this close to the Slytherin common room was never a good idea. There was only so much he could do to deter his students from preying on the 'Golden Boy.'

James had his arms crossed over his chest, a knowing expression on his handsome features when Severus turned back to him.

"You worry about him too much," he said lightly. "Harry can look out for himself, Severus. He's not a baby anymore."

"Hm," Severus said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. "You do remember what it is to be a child?" he asked, leafing his long fingers through some papers on his desk. "And that particular child of yours, Potter, if a beacon for mischief."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

Severus rolled his eyes and James stood up.

"Though I am glad you're here," he said honestly. "Doesn't hurt to have an extra pair of eyes on him."

"No harm will come to him while I am here, James," Severus said quietly.

James had no doubt.

"Though..." Severus continued warningly, as a darker, more predatory look took over James' face, "you probably should have mentioned you're here... right under his nose... three, four times a week..."

"Sometimes more," James interrupted, taking a more deliberate step towards Severus and eyeing him lazily through long lashes. Severus drew in a dark breath as a tanned hand brushed his curtain of hair aside, hazelnut eyes full of affection as they drunk in his pale features. After ten years he would have assumed his senses would have dulled to such a familiar touch.

Unfortunately, as James deliberately ran a thumb over his cheekbone, and Severus felt his heart thump harder in his chest, he suspected his current predicament was permanent.

"Not the point," he muttered distractedly.

"It's not Harry I'm here to see during the week, Severus, you know that. He's a Hogwarts student now. I can't interfere during term time. How is he supposed to cope if I demand his attention all the time?"

"Yet I am to contend with it?"

"You... don't have a choice," James grinned before he kissed him, his mouth hot and wet as he pulled Severus against him.

The work Severus had been attempting slipped from the desk as James forced him back upon it, Severus' trousers falling to drop at his ankles.

"Insufferable..." he muttered, a faint smirk on his face as James spread his legs apart.

Harry awoke far too early on Christmas Day, not to the now-familiar curtains of his four-poster, but to bright window overlooking the quidditch stadium. He had offered to stay in his dorm over the Christmas break, but couldn't deny that Severus' and his fathers' insistence that the three of them share accommodation within the grounds made him feel more at home.

He threw back the bed-covers, dislodging presents from the end of his bed as he knocked on his parents bedroom door. When there was no answer, he opened it carefully. They weren't inside. It was still very early. The sun was pale as it shone out over a snow covered Hogwarts.

Harry made his way back to his bed and sat down, smiling as he picked up one of his presents, wondering what they'd decided to indulge in this year. He managed to stop himself before he opened any, knowing his father would disapprove of not waiting for them all to be here.

He crossed to the window, and only when he squinted could he make out two figures on brooms, looping through the sky. Harry smiled, grabbed a pair of trousers and his gloves and padded through the empty castle. By the time he'd waded through the snow, the sun had risen more fully and the flying figures had landed. The edge of the pitch was entirely frozen, so it was almost like an ice rink.

Not that his father and Severus seemed to mind.

Even from a distance, Harry could tell it was them. He had never seen any other couple wrap around each other in quite the way they did. His father hugged Severus with all his body, looked at him with eyes full of emotion Harry could never quite describe. He could only hope that one day when he was older, he would be just as lucky to find an ounce of the contentment his father seemed to have found.

He rolled his eyes and looked away with a grimace as the men kissed, brooms cast to the side and frost on their faces.

He had often wondered about what his life would have been like had Severus not been Severus... And instead his mother had been with James. And he always found that, though he wished with every ounce of his being that Lily was still alive, he could not imagine his father with anyone else. Not even her.

He'd never pitied himself for having two fathers. Quite the contrary. Harry knew Severus loved him. The man was not as forthright with his emotions or parenting abilities as James, but Harry considered him family just the same. He had never been made to feel like an outsider or that he did not belong. The fact that Severus was so cold with most people, and showed him such warmth, only made Harry feel even luckier.

Harry was pulled rather suddenly from his thoughts by an icy blast to his face. He stumbled back, nearly falling. He glowered at his father, but he merely laughed as he gathered another snow ball. He dodged the following one, seeker skills aiding him in retaining his warmth. When he'd battled his way to his father's side, he was pulled into a one-armed hug. James kept his other hand around Severus' waist.

With the older wizards creating a pathway within the snow, the walk back to the castle was much easier. None of them were aware of a pair of twinkling blue eyes watching the family from the

headmasters office, as they crossed the grounds.

Harry paused as they reached the top of the steps to the front doors to the castle. He turned back and eyed the white beauty with growing fondness, entirely unaware of just how much adventure Hogwarts and life in general had in store for him.

Severus laid a hand on his shoulder, eyebrow raised in silent questioning and Harry shook his head, dispelling the man's frown, and smiled up at him. He had never felt luckier.

## Chapter End Notes

The End.

## End Notes

Re-posted and re-edited. Written by BlueHorizon6 on fanfiction.net

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